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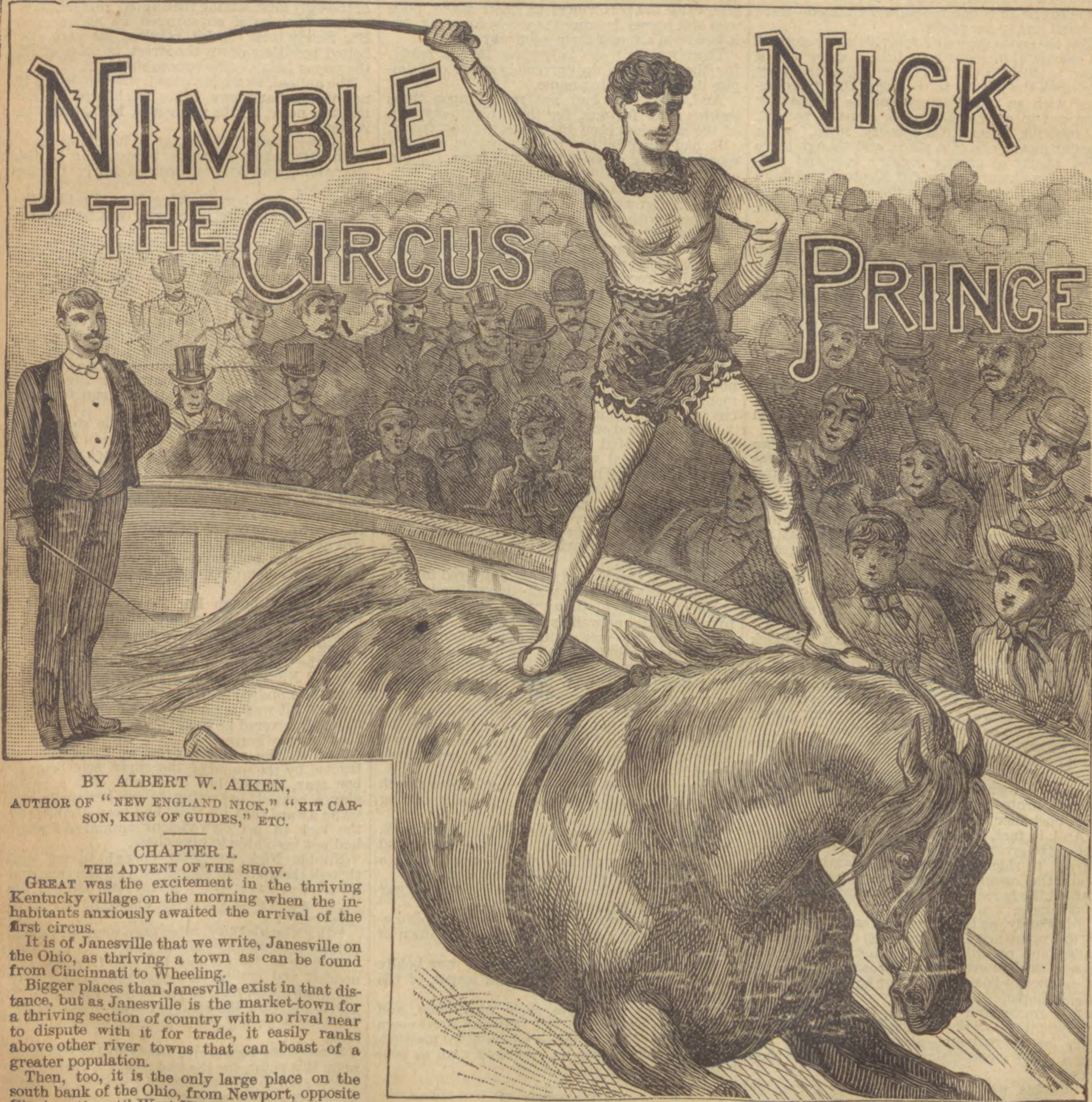
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SON, KING OF GUIDES," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE ADVENT OF THE SHOW.

GREAT was the excitement in the thriving Kentucky village on the morning when the inhabitants anxiously awaited the arrival of the first circus.

It is of Janesville that we write, Janesville on the Ohio, as thriving a town as can be found from Cincinnati to Wheeling.

Bigger places than Janesville exist in that distance, but as Janesville is the market-town for a thriving section of country with no rival near to dispute with it for trade, it easily ranks above other river towns that can boast of a greater population.

Then, too, it is the only large place on the south bank of the Ohio, from Newport, opposite Cincinnati, until West Virginia is reached.

NIMBLE NICK IN HIS DASHING BAREBACK ACT.

Virginia it was, at the time of which we write, for our story is of a period just before the war, before West Virginia was in existence.

This was the first circus which had visited that section of country for a long time, and as the people of Janesville were a lively, go-ahead set, fond of all sorts of amusements, the announcement of the show's visit had caused great excitement.

"Sharpley's Colossal Moral Silver Show" was the name of the company, and a bill-board some fifty feet long had been erected on the main street of the town and adorned with the usual pictorial bills, representing all sorts of daring feats of horsemanship.

And then there were pictures of all sorts of wild animals, and lifelike representations of a most remarkable dwarf and an equally remarkable giant.

The great feature of the circus, the clown, too, was not forgotten.

It was the "Great Shakesperian Jester" this time, and on the bill-board his "counterfeit presentment," made a most imposing show.

Of course this circus was a very small affair or else it would not have attempted to travel through a section of country where the "stands"—the towns in which the show exhibited—were so small and so far apart.

But the good people of Janesville never stopped to calculate in regard to this; a show was a show to them, were it big or little, and they thronged the streets to welcome the "procession" with as much alacrity as the people now turn out to gaze at Barnum's monster parade.

Janesville is no little country town, but a regular metropolis of a place, and though there were plenty of gawky country lads and red-cheeked, awkward, corn-fed Kentucky girls in sight, yet they were from the country around about, and formed a decided contrast to the well-dressed belles and beaux of the town.

Kentucky is justly famous for the beauty of its women, and there was one girl in the main street of Janesville on this day who was lovely enough to have entered the contest for the golden apple with goddess of love, great Venus herself.

She was tall, beautifully formed, with the carriage of a queen.

An oval face, yet black as night, and hair of the hue of the raven's wing.

Exquisitely cut features, a fine type in every respect of the blooming Kentucky belle, excepting that she lacked the slight coarseness which is often found in these beauties.

Eglantine Dunwiddie she was called, an orphan heiress, who, by the death of her parents was left a fortune estimated to reach in round figures a hundred thousand dollars at the least.

She had just come of age, and being possessed of this handsome estate in addition to her own personal charms it was no wonder that she was sought in wedlock by every marriageable man, young or old, for miles around.

But there was not a single one of her suitors who could boast that the beautiful, though somewhat haughty and self-willed girl, had ever cast a favoring glance in his direction.

Miss Eglantine was mounted upon a jet-black horse of rare beauty—a genuine Kentucky thoroughbred, a mettlesome, high-spirited animal, as was plainly evident from his fretfulness as he chafed continually at the bit, and required the constant pressure of his rider's restraining hand upon the rein to keep him in his place.

A jockey—a good judge of horses—would have been inclined, from the peculiar trick which the steed had of rolling his eyes upward so as to exhibit the whites, to pronounce the animal a vicious brute who some day would prove an ugly customer to handle.

And, in fact, the girl had been warned by her old negro groom to this effect, and recommended not to ride the horse; but Eglantine did not know the meaning of the word fear, and regarded the horse's antics as coming from mere playfulness.

Big Sandy, as the horse was called, was a son of the renowned Lexington, the champion four-miler, and regarded in Kentucky as the best horse that had ever looked through a bridle, and it was not to be expected that he should act like a cart-horse.

Her uncle and guardian, Colonel Elphenor Dunwiddie—a dark-faced, stern-looking man of fifty or thereabouts—accompanied her, also on a steed whose value mounted into the thousands.

But this was an old and steady horse, and ever and anon he turned his eyes upon his restless companion as if to ask why on earth he didn't keep still and have done with such foolishness.

The colonel had been observing the unsteadiness of his ward's steed with considerable anxiety, and at last he felt that he ought to give her a word of warning.

"Don't you think, Eglantine, that you had better dismount and allow some one to hold Sandy until the procession gets by?" he asked. "I am afraid the music of the band will be too much for him."

"Oh no, uncle; he is only a little restless and playful, that is all," she answered patting the arching neck of the uneasy steed. "And to dismount would be showing the white feather in a perfectly disgraceful way!" and her proud lip curled in contempt.

"If I can't manage a horse like Big Sandy at all times and in all places I might as well give up riding."

Just then the distant blare of the circus band announced the approach of the show.

It was coming up the pike from Paris, where it had made its last stand, a good fifty-mile journey, and in order to cover the distance the showmen had commenced the march at midnight and had been on the road ever since.

The band-wagon—the golden chariot—common to all circuses—was in the advance, and behind came the performers on their steeds, both men and horses looking the worse for wear, for it had been a tough night's journey.

There was only one lady rider in the party, for the show was an extremely small one despite its high sounding name.

And, too, fate had not smiled upon these seekers after fortune, for their Kentucky trip of the show had been disastrous in the extreme.

It had been in the State now for about a month, having crossed the Ohio from Illinois, and had hardly made expenses anywhere.

The weather had been unfavorable, for there had been a great deal of rain, which of course interfered with business.

The manager had run out of funds, and with the show into Janesville came two business men of Paris whose mission it was to collect from the Janesville receipts certain moneys which the show owed, but had been unable to pay in Paris.

There was the landlord of the hotel which had entertained the circus folks, and the man who had furnished the feed for the animals, both of whom were in hopes that in Janesville, always noted for liberally patronizing all kinds of shows, money enough might be taken in to put the circus on its legs again.

After the band-wagon, at the head of the performers, mounted on a thoroughbred brown mare, an animal which showed its blood and breeding in every motion, rode the star rider of the show, a good-looking young man, with clear-cut, resolute features, and the square, firm jaw which signifies a man of metal.

Clear and bold as the eyes of an eagle were his dark brown orbs—fearless eyes, frank and honest in their gaze.

His thick, black-brown hair clustered in little crispy curls all over his well-shaped head.

He had a high, broad forehead, which betokened brains as well as courage.

In figure he was about the medium height, magnificently built, with thews and muscles seemingly of steel, and so perfect was he in his horsemanship that he rode the animal as though he was a part of the steed.

He was neatly dressed in a suit of black velvet, with a daintily-frilled white shirt, the broad collar of which was turned over his vest, after the fashion affected by that lordly poet, great Byron.

Upon his head he wore a milk-white slouch hat with a rather high crown and a curling brim.

A black silk handkerchief encircled his neck, loosely knotted in front in sailor style, and above the knot sparkled a fine diamond set in a ring, the only piece of jewelry he wore.

Handsome riding-boots incased his lower limbs, reaching just above the knee.

Take him for all in all, the people of Janesville had never looked upon a finer specimen of the genus, man.

This was Nicholas Monday, who was boldly billed as the champion rider and leaper of the world.

All circus men have their nick-name, and among his associates Nick Monday was known as Nimble Nick, a name which fitted most admirably, for he was as nimble a man as ever stepped foot in a circus ring.

CHAPTER II. THE RESCUE.

As the proprietor of the show was wont to remark:

"What the people want is noise and plenty of it. What do they know about music, or care? Nine-tenths of them don't know good music from bad when they hear it, and those who do don't care. So go in strong on the drums and cymbals, for that is the kind of work that counts."

The band followed the instructions to the letter, and if they didn't produce much music, they succeeded in making a good deal of noise.

Miss Dunwiddie's horse grew more and more restive as the music came nearer, and it taxed all her skill to keep him quiet.

He danced up and down, and but for her firm hand on the bit would surely have bolted. As it was she began to have serious doubts as to whether she would be able to restrain the beast.

But just as the chariot came opposite to the spot where her prancing horse had cleared a circle around him, the drums and cymbals put in some extra good work, and the steed became fairly frantic.

He reared and plunged, and then lashed out viciously with his hind feet.

The colonel had approached with the idea of offering assistance, and his horse got the benefit of the ugly kick, laming the animal immediately.

And then, as if encouraged by his success, Big Sandy took the bit between his teeth and bolted headlong down the street, in spite of all the young lady's endeavors to stop him.

The animal, as we have said, was self-willed if not vicious, and now being frightened by the unusual noise, all the ugliness of his nature was roused.

Up the street he went, at a headlong pace. Vain attempts were made to stop him by the spectators, but he now seemed fairly frantic with fear.

The colonel's horse having been disabled by the kick, Dunwiddie, of course, was not able to give chase.

Nimble Nick, however, had perceived the incident, and was quick to hasten to the rescue.

Putting spurs to his mount, he followed in pursuit, and with him came the bystanders, running at the top of their speed.

Straight through the town went the runaway, and although Eglantine realized that she was in deadly peril, yet she did not lose her head but kept her seat with as much composure as though it was a mere every-day matter for Big Sandy to take the bit in his mouth and run for dear life.

Up the Main street thundered the steed, ears thrown back and bit firmly clinched in his teeth, Eglantine sticking as firmly to his back as though she was a part of the animal.

Big Sandy was a race-horse born and bred, and under the excitement of fear and ugliness combined was running at tremendous speed; but the brown mare which Nimble Nick bestrode was also a blooded animal—also of the strain of Lexington, a four-miler who, on the Nashville road, had come close to the time made by her noble sire.

And so, although Big Sandy was doing his best, the brown mare gained steadily upon him, and then, too, Nimble Nick was aiding his horse, riding with all a jockey's skill.

By the time the outskirts of the town were reached Nimble Nick had succeeded in getting within a hundred yards of the affrighted animal, and it was apparent that before another mile was covered he would be on even terms with the runaway horse.

And as the pursuer drew up Eglantine, attracted by the sound of the rapid hoof-beats in her rear, turned her head and cast a rapid glance behind, expecting to see her uncle, not being aware that his steed had been disabled by the kick of her own vicious animal so that he had not been able to give chase.

Nimble Nick was near enough to see that though the girl was riding with all the ease and grace of an experienced jockey, she had not the least control over the horse, and so he called out cheerily:

"Don't be alarmed, miss, keep your seat and I will soon be up alongside of you!"

In spite of the peril of her situation the girl nodded and smiled in reply, and, brief as was the glance she cast, it was sufficient to enable her to see that the stranger was about as attractive a young gentleman as she had ever seen.

Scant time was there, however, for reflection upon this point, for she had scarcely turned her head again to her steed when Big Sandy, apparently tired of racing along in the straight road, suddenly wheeled to the left and took a side road which led directly to the river, only a short distance away.

Sandy had evidently become mad with fright, for he rushed straight toward the stream, as though he designed to plunge into it and swim to the Ohio shore.

It was the time of high water.

The river was "bank-full and rising," to use the old boatmen's phrase, and the road ended at a point where there was an overhanging bank, and the muddy, swollen current ran both swiftly and deeply.

"Here's a chance for a ducking!" Nimble Nick exclaimed, as he swerved from the main road and followed fast in the footsteps of the frightened horse.

Big Sandy never slackened the least in his pace, but kept on like a mad horse until almost the very edge of the river was reached, and then he came to a sudden halt.

The result of this maneuver was that Eglantine went flying over his head into the Ohio, sailing through the air like a bird, and plunging into the water head-first.

The horse, relieved of his burden, gave a shrill neigh, as though of triumph, and with uplifted head and waving tail galloped off up the bank.

Eglantine, expert in all out-door sports, was a tolerably good swimmer, but half-stunned by the shock produced by the sudden contact with the water, and hampered by the long skirt of her riding-habit, she was not well fitted to cope with the tide, although but a few feet from the shore; so the current began to bear her out into the stream.

Nick had given such hot chase that he reached the spot immediately after Eglantine had risen to the surface from her involuntary dive.

Though an expert swimmer, the young acrobat had no idea of spoiling his nice clothes by a bath in the muddy Ohio; but, all the same, he was quick to act. Bounding from his docile mare, he leaped lightly down the bank. On the well-littered shore he found a boatman's pole. He seized this, and reached it to the floating equestrienne. She had presence of mind enough to grasp it, and was safely drawn to the shore. Nick assisted Eglantine to ascend the steep bank, where she sought a seat on a convenient lumber-pile.

Nick at once looked around to see what had become of the runaway steed, but Big Sandy had made good use of his liberty, and was out of sight.

Eglantine leaned back against the support offered by the boards, exhausted, and it was a few moments before she recovered her breath, then as he approached her again she addressed him.

"You have saved my life, sir, and, believe me, I shall never forget it as long as I live."

"Oh, don't mention it, I beg," Nick replied, gallantly. "I am glad to have been of service to you."

"My name is Eglantine Dunwiddie, and I come of a race who never forget a favor rendered. The time may come when I will be able to repay this service, and until then I count myself your debtor."

"What is your name?"

"Nicholas Monday."

The girl smiled. By this time she had recovered her self-possession and was like her own self again.

"The name is an odd one, and I am sure I shall never forget either it or the service—"

"Oh, nonsense! the service is naught, and no debt exists," Nimble Nick interrupted, lightly.

The arrival of the townsmen, in buggies and wagons, and on foot, checked further conversation.

In the first carriage came Colonel Dunwiddie.

CHAPTER III.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

"THANK heaven! you are safe, Eglantine!" the colonel exclaimed as he jumped out of a carriage and approached the girl with outstretched hands.

The occupants of the other vehicles followed his example as fast as they reached the spot, and then the runners who had made good time came straggling along.

"Have you been hurt by that brute? He ought to be shot!" the colonel continued.

"Oh, no; I have only been obliged to take a bath without being allowed time to prepare for it," the girl answered cheerily.

"Sandy took it into his head to jump the Ohio but when he got to the water's edge he changed his mind; he suddenly stopped, but I went on, and had it not been for this gentleman I probably would have been at the bottom of the river, for I tell you, uncle, it is no easy matter to swim with these long skirts."

Dunwiddie cast a puzzled glance at Nimble

Nick, for that gentleman, in his neat and trim attire, looking as if he had just come out of a band-box, was a decided contrast to the drenched girl with her clinging wet clothes.

"Did this young man rescue you?" the colonel asked, turning brusquely upon Nimble Nick.

The aristocratic colonel, like all Kentucky gentlemen considered "show people" but little better than vagabonds.

"Yes, by the aid of that boat-pole, and if Sandy had not pitched me into the river, Mr. Monday would have overtaken him, for his horse was coming up rapidly when my runaway turned out of the main road."

"Strange, strange!" exclaimed the colonel. "I did not believe there were ten horses in this State who could outfoot Big Sandy," and as he spoke Dunwiddie cast an inquiring glance at Nimble Nick's now demure looking brown mare, who, like the well-trained animal that she was, stood quietly waiting her master's pleasure.

"Possibly this mare of mine is one of the ten," Nick suggested pleasantly, although in his heart he resented the rather contemptuous manner of the Kentuckian.

"Perhaps she is, but she don't look it," the colonel replied haughtily.

"You cannot always judge by looks, sir," Nick remarked. "That mare is an own daughter of Lexington, and her dam was strong in Messenger blood. A year ago she won the Phenix Hotel Cup at Lexington, beating as fine horses as ever came to the post."

"You don't mean to say that that is Cynthia!" exclaimed Dunwiddie in astonishment.

The intelligent animal pricked up her ears at this mention of her name, and this exhibition of equine sagacity so pleased Eglantine, that a wild desire to possess the beautiful creature seized her.

"The same; it is Cynthia, sure enough," the young acrobat assured.

Then he chirruped to the horse, and the intelligent animal walked to her master and rested her muzzle on his shoulder.

"Well, I don't exactly understand how a showman like you could come in possession of an animal like Cynthia!" exclaimed Dunwiddie bluntly and with evident hauteur.

Nick had well learned the showman's maxim: "A wise man holds his tongue when he is from home," so, although his impetuous blood fairly tingled at the coarse insolence of the Kentuckian, yet by no outward sign did he manifest it.

"The riddle is easily read, sir," he answered.

"The sporting gentleman who owned Cynthia was unwise enough to risk her upon the uncertain chance of fortune. My luck was better than his, so I won the mare."

"I see, I see," responded the colonel, with a nod.

The explanation was reasonable to any one who was acquainted with the thoroughbred sport who had owned the horse. When the fit seized him he had been known to lose, at play, even the suit of clothes which he wore.

"Well, young man, I am very much obliged to you for the service you have done my niece," the colonel remarked, not appeased by the evident ease and independence of the showman.

He took out his pocket-book, a large, old-fashioned wallet, capacious enough to hold bank-notes at full length without folding, and which was well supplied with bills.

"And as I hate to be indebted to anybody," he added, "I am prepared to cancel this obligation right now on a money basis; so name your figure. How much do you want?"

There was a glint of fire in the dark eyes of Nimble Nick, but, by a great effort, he restrained the impulse which was so strong within him to tell the Kentuckian what he thought of his offer.

Eglantine had seen this flash of anger and scorn in the eyes of the young man, and was on her feet in an instant.

"Uncle, you must not offer the gentleman money!" she exclaimed.

"No, of course not!" added Nick, seeing a way out of the dilemma for the young lady's sake.

"All I did was to do what any one would have done. I did not risk either life or limb."

"Oh, yes, I comprehend that; but you must understand we consider that an obligation exists and we would rather cancel it at once," the colonel persisted, almost offensively in manner, and he detached a bill from the rest and held it out to the young circus man.

"Here's a hundred dollars; take it and we'll call the matter square."

"Excuse me, sir, I do not take money for such a service!" and Nimble Nick waved his

hand, fully as dignified in manner as the colonel had been.

"If I needed money it might be a different matter, but I do not. I am a gentleman of independent fortune who holds his money as lightly as the purse wherein it is carried."

The young acrobat had done a good deal of theater-going in his time, thanks to the courtesy which exists in the "profession," and had heard some stage hero declaim something like this. The astonished Kentuckian did not know exactly what to make of the stranger. To a Dunwiddie a showman was an improvident vagabond, who lived from hand to mouth; but Nick did not appear to be any such man.

He was well dressed, looked like a gentleman and talked like one; and then, too, he must have possessed money, else he never could have won the four-mile racer, the renowned Cynthia.

The stranger's prompt refusal of the hundred dollars perplexed him, but while the colonel hesitated, uncertain what to do, Eglantine, appreciating the motives which prompted the stranger to decline all reward, and with a heart overflowing with gratitude stepped forward, and drawing a costly diamond ring from her finger exclaimed, impulsively:

"While I honor you, sir, for your refusal of a money reward, permit me to hope that you will not reject this slight token which my gratitude urges me to tender you. It is an old family heirloom that has been handed down from mother to daughter."

"Take it, I pray you, not because it is valuable, but because by so doing you will gratify the grateful girl whose life you have saved."

It was not possible for Nick to refuse, and so, with his best bow, he accepted the jewel.

"I am a thousand times overpaid for the slight service I have been able to render you, and now I am your debtor," he replied, gallantly.

The lady bowed, but shook her head as if unwilling to accept that view of the matter, but the colonel, with a face which plainly showed annoyance at his niece's action, assisted her into the buggy which had brought him to the ground and they departed.

Nick mounted and rode away, and the spectators slowly withdrew, all discussing the affair.

All in all, it was as lively an incident as Janesville had seen for many a day.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COLONEL'S POSITION.

THIS affair, of course, was a splendid advertisement for the circus, and the tent was crowded.

It was not a large tent, and would not hold over a thousand people.

The entertainment gave entire satisfaction, for, as all the performers understood that the existence of the show depended upon their success at that point, each and every one did his best.

Among the throng was Eglantine Dunwiddie, as bright, beautiful and brilliant as ever, looking none the worse for her morning's adventure, which had made her the observed of all observers.

As a performer Nick Monday easily had precedence, and his dashing bare-back act upon his thoroughbred brown mare won universal applause.

And when, after two recalls, he begged the audience to excuse him for the present, on the ground that he must have time to prepare for his next act, as he bowed himself out of the ring, Eglantine rose in her seat and threw him a bouquet of beautiful flowers which she had plucked from her garden with her own fair hand.

This was the signal for another outburst of applause, for there were few people in the audience who were not acquainted with the romantic circumstances under which the two had met.

But, though this compliment, paid by the acknowledged belle of Janesville, appeared to greatly please the audience, there were a few who did not admire it, and prominent among these were Colonel Dunwiddie and some of his "high-toned" friends.

The colonel stood in a little group of gentlemen by the doorway, disdaining to take seats to look at the "tom-foolery," as they termed the performance.

A frown appeared upon her guardian's face as he noticed the impulsive action of the girl, and the faces of his companions darkened, and—to use the common expression—they "turned up their noses" in contempt at Eglantine's bestowal of the bouquet upon the handsome showman.

Close by Dunwiddie's elbow stood his particu-

lar friend, Judge Richardson, a white-haired, swarthy-faced old fellow, one of the leading citizens of the town, although he was a man of no property, having run through it all, being a hard drinker and addicted to gambling.

Belah Richardson, though, was a good lawyer, had an excellent practice, and for years had been Colonel Dunwiddie's confidential man of business, and was popularly supposed to know about as much of the colonel's affairs as he did himself.

The Judge nudged Dunwiddie with his elbow, his lip curling in disgust at the action of the impulsive girl.

"I say, old fellow, isn't your niece making a goose of herself?" he whispered in the colonel's ear.

"Well, she certainly isn't exhibiting much sense," Dunwiddie replied, angrily, but using the same cautious tone.

"I heard that she gave the fellow one of her mother's diamond rings?"

"Yes, it is true."

"Perfectly ridiculous!"

"Of course, there isn't any doubt about it; but what are you going to do with such a headstrong girl?"

"Didn't you attempt to remonstrate with her?"

"Certainly."

"And the result?"

"Nothing at all."

"She would have her own way then?"

"Yes; she said—and it is true enough, too—I have never interfered with you, uncle, in regard to how you manage my property."

"You tell me that such and such a course would be the best, and I reply, go ahead, use your own judgment, you ought to know more about it than I do."

"But in this matter I do not think you ought to interfere with me."

"To the man who saved my life I cannot be too grateful, and if I choose to emphasize that gratitude by bestowing upon him a trinket which to me seems especially valuable, I do not see that any one has cause to interfere."

"Very logically put," the old lawyer remarked.

"And that phrase about not interfering with you seems to convey the idea that she suspects you have not always acted for her best interests in the matter."

"Well, I am not particularly long-headed, but it seemed to me that there was a sort of latent threat in her words," Dunwiddie observed, slowly.

"Yes, she as good as said, mind your own business and don't bother your head about mine, or else I shall be under the necessity of looking into the way you have managed my affairs."

"That is about it."

"Not a doubt, my dear fellow!"

"Well, the words came upon me so unexpectedly that for the moment I was dumfounded, for you see, judge, I had not the slightest suspicion that she at all mistrusted I have not managed her affairs to the best advantage."

"Well, I don't know that you hav'n't," the other remarked, slowly, half closing his eyes in a reflective sort of way.

"It is just according to the way that men look at that sort of thing, you know."

"But humans are inclined to be censorious, and if your accounts were ever given a rigid overhauling, some of the transactions might appear decidedly fishy to men inclined to fault-finding."

"Errors of judgment, of course," the colonel replied, a little nervously.

"Certainly, of course."

"And in about everything I did I went by your advice."

"Oh, I admit that; you can catch me on the hip, as far as that goes, every time."

"I have made mistakes, of course; I admit it. I am but mortal, and mortal man is prone to err as the sparks fly upward."

"But, old fellow, the weak point of your defense is that, so far as your ward's money is concerned, you had no business to use it to bolster up your losing speculation."

"Be careful!" exclaimed Dunwiddie, with a nervous glance around him.

"Oh, don't be alarmed; they are all busy gaping at the show. No danger of any one overhearing us."

"Can't be too cautious, you know."

"You are perfectly right; but there isn't the least danger. But to resume the subject: your niece has never called you to any account, and it is lucky for you that she hasn't, for you would have hard work to bring things out all right."

"Do you know how you stand?"

"No," replied Dunwiddie, irritably.

"I am sick of the whole business, and have never had the heart to go into the matter."

"I know I am terribly behind, and that every attempt I have made to pull out of the mire has only resulted in plunging me in deeper."

"Well, just for curiosity, the other day I examined the account and struck a balance. How much do you think you are behind?"

"I have not the least idea."

"You are in pretty deep."

"I expect so."

"What would you say to a cool hundred thousand dollars?"

Although the colonel was a man who prided himself upon the control which he possessed over his features, yet he could not help betraying the amazement which he felt when the words of his associate reached his ears.

"One hundred thousand dollars," he murmured, as if unable to believe he had heard aright.

"That's the figure."

"Impossible!"

"No, it isn't. I wish for your sake that it was, but in these matters there's no use of attempting to disguise the truth."

"The best way is always to confront the danger boldly."

"Yes, I presume you are right."

"From first to last you have used about one hundred thousand dollars of your niece's money in your speculation and every cent of it has been sunk. Now, then, suppose she calls you to a settlement—where are you?"

A desperate look came into the colonel's eyes at the bluntly put question, and the judge, knowing Dunwiddie as intimately as though he had been his brother, understood the thought that had come into his mind.

"A pistol bullet would settle the whole thing, eh?" he asked.

"You have guessed my thought," the colonel replied, hoarsely.

"But it will not come to that unless you are pushed to the wall, and colonel, that is exactly what must not be done."

"Miss Eglantine will not be apt to make any inquiry into her affairs unless she is instigated to it by some outside party, and I had an idea that you were providing against such a contingency by making a match between her and your son, Bud."

"Yes, that was my plan," Dunwiddie admitted.

"And ain't it going to work?"

"I'm afraid not, but I had hopes that when Bud returns next week he might succeed in making an impression."

"Eglantine seems to like him well enough as a cousin, but apparently not well enough to marry him."

"I say, colonel, I think it is a good thing that this circus only stays one night in this neighborhood."

"Why?" but though Dunwiddie put the question, there was an ugly look upon his face which plainly told he had guessed the other's meaning.

"Because this circus chap has fascinated the girl, and she is just the right age to make a fool of herself."

"If I thought there was any chance of such a thing occurring I would kill the scoundrel with my own hand!" Dunwiddie exclaimed, fiercely.

"Oh, I reckon there will not be any need of resorting to any such desperate measures. The circus pulls up stakes to-night, and that will end the romance unless she follows the show to Ripley, which is not likely."

"I will take measures to put a stop to any nonsense of that kind!" the colonel declared, firmly.

"But without coming to an open quarrel with the girl, mind!" the judge hastened to observe.

"Above all things you must avoid that."

"Yes, I presume it would not be wise for me to quarrel with her."

"Decidedly not; if you do, the chances are a hundred to one that it will upset everything."

"This is a game that must be played in the most cautious manner, and you cannot afford to lose a single point. Coax the girl, but do not attempt to drive her, and if it looks as if this circus rider is going to make trouble, you must set Bud after him."

The advice was good, and the colonel promised to follow it.

CHAPTER V.

THE MANAGER.

EVERYBODY connected with the show felt encouraged by the large attendance, and particu-

larly pleased were the two gentlemen who had journeyed from Paris, Jonas Braham, the landlord, and Marmaduke Spelter, the groceryman, with the idea of collecting out of the Janesville receipts the money which the show had failed to secure in their town on account of rainy weather.

It had been their idea to sit in the ticket-wagon and take the money as it came in, and Sharpley, the circus boss, had not expressed any disapproval of the plan, but when the time for the performance approached, and the pair saw the crowd collected around the ticket-wagon, anxious to secure the necessary pasteboards, which would entitle them to an admission to the show, they came to the conclusion that the job was a little out of their line and altogether too big for them to attempt.

So they suggested that Sharpley should sell the tickets as usual, and they would take a position in the wagon behind, and attend to the money.

But Sharpley, who was commonly known in the show world as "the man with the silver tongue," soon convinced the two that this would be a very foolish thing to do.

Their presence in the ticket-wagon would be sure to excite suspicion, and if it became rumored around town that the show was in difficulties, it would be certain to hurt the attendance.

"The small local bills I must pay, of course, as they are presented," he explained. "Because if I attempted to put them off, it would be apt to raise a row immediately." The balance of the money I will put in a sachel and lock up in the ticket trunk in the wagon. You can keep the keys, and after the money comes in at night, we can put it all together in the sachel, take it down to the hotel and make a divvy there."

This proposition seemed all fair and above-board, and although the Kentuckians, being shrewd and unscrupulous men themselves, were inclined to believe that everybody else was just the same, showmen in particular, yet in this instance were unable to see how they ran any risk by agreeing to Sharpley's proposal.

So what remained of the afternoon receipts, after what bills were paid that had been presented, was placed in a small black sachel, which the manager carefully locked, then it was placed in the iron-bound ticket trunk, and this was locked, and then the keys were delivered to the "sharks," as in the parlance of the show world all such men are termed; one man taking the key of the trunk, and the other the key of the sachel.

Sharpley seemed to be in excellent spirits, although he had made such an arrangement with the sharks that they would profit far more by the luck which had attended the circus in Janesville than he, but this fact did not seem to trouble him any, although of course he was well aware of the fact that they had taken advantage of his necessities to drive the hardest kind of a bargain with him.

He really joked about the matter, saying:

"Well, gentlemen, I reckon you have got me foul this time, and are going to take the lion's share, but I ain't the man to squeal, even if I do get nipped once in a while."

And the Kentuckians chuckled when they were by themselves, and expressed the opinion that it wasn't any wonder that the show hadn't made any money with such a reckless, careless fellow at the head of it.

At night there was another large audience in attendance, and everybody was correspondingly happy.

Eglantine Dunwiddie was present, although the colonel had expressed his surprise that she should wish to attend both performances, but the girl replied that a circus didn't come along every day, and she thought she ought to make the most of the present opportunity.

Dunwiddie also attended in company with the judge, and kept a close watch upon the expressive face of the girl whenever Nimble Nick appeared in the the ring.

The interest that Eglantine took in the handsome circus-rider was apparent, and the judge took occasion to whisper in the colonel's ear:

"It is a mighty good thing for you that this fellow clears out to-night, for if he remained in the town it is a horse to a hen that he would capture the girl."

The colonel nodded, for he had arrived at the same opinion.

It was evident that the dashing young stranger had made more impression upon Eglantine than any other gentleman whom she had encountered, but Dunwiddie felt tolerably certain that this unexpected encounter between the two would not interfere with his plans on account of the departure of the young man.

He did not believe that Eglantine would attempt to follow the fellow; he was sure she had too much pride for that.

And though Dunwiddie chafed at his niece so openly displaying the interest which she took in the handsome rider, yet he did not deem that the affair would materially interfere with his schemes.

But this is an uncertain world, and as the poet truly remarks:

"The best laid plans of mice and men,
Gang oft aglee."

And the scheming colonel was fated to discover this fact before he was many hours older. The performance drew near its end.

Nimble Nick had made his last appearance and had gone to the dressing tent to attire himself in his street apparel.

There was only about a half an hour more of the show and Nimble Nick hurried up in his dressing with the idea of going around to the main entrance of the tent and getting a look at the beautiful girl who had made fully as great an impression upon him as he had upon her.

But as the young acrobats stepped into the open air he was somewhat surprised to see the manager Sharpley, standing near apparently waiting for him, for the Main Guy, to use the circus term which signifies the proprietor of the show, no sooner caught sight of Nimble Nick than he made a motion intended to impose caution and then beckoned him to follow.

There was a peculiar look on Sharpley's face which appeared to Nick's shrewd eyes to indicate that something out of the common had occurred.

Sharpley led the way to the river which was only a short distance away.

The moon was out and afforded ample light.

Drawn up on the shore was a light skiff with a pair of oars in it.

Sharpley went directly to the boat, took a seat upon the stern and motioned Nimble Nick to sit down by his side.

Our hero had noticed during the walk that Sharpley carried a small parcel wrapped up in a newspaper under his arm.

"Cully, these are rough times!" exclaimed the old circus man as the rider took a seat by his side, slapping him familiarly on the knee.

Tom Sharpley was a character if there ever was one.

In appearance he was a bluff, hearty-looking fellow, for all the world like a back country farmer, but he was as shrewd a man as there was in the show business and showmen are generally reported to be far above the average in smartness.

"Yes, you have had an up-hill fight of it, but these two good houses ought to pull you up a little."

"They would if those two Kentucky sharks hadn't caught me where my hair is short."

"Is that so?"

"Oh, yes; they had me in a tight place and they put the screws on."

"They assumed the Lexington claims and those with their own bills, and a little cash which they advanced to bring us to this stand, brings their bill up to a trifle over four hundred dollars, and before they would agree to help me out of the scrape they made me sign a contract to give them one-half of the gross receipts in addition to their claim."

"That was outrageous."

"They had me in a tight place, and went for a pound of flesh, blood and all."

"I couldn't help myself, you know. It was either agree or else bust."

"I thought there was a chance to pick up a few dollars for myself and for you boys here in Janesville, and so I made up my mind to go it."

Nimble Nick began to see the game of the old veteran.

"The dog is dead now, old fellow, anyway, for the printer has come down on me for a little trifle of two thousand dollars, and there's a deputy sheriff in front now with a writ of attachment to seize the hull show."

"The deuce you say!"

"Honest Injun! I happened to be in front of the tent and spotted the fellow when he came up. I remembered being introduced to the cuss a couple of years ago, and when I saw him sneaking up I suspected that there was mischief afoot."

"A burnt child dreads the fire, eh?"

"Yes, that is about the size of it. I have had considerable experience in my time with these petty officers of the law, and I begin to believe that I can detect a constable or a deputy sheriff the moment I lay eyes on the cuss."

"Well, to come to the point. I sized up my man, and came to the conclusion that he was a fellow who would do a good deal for a ten dollar bill."

"And you tried it on, eh?"

"Immediately; and it worked to a charm. As I suspected, he had the legal documents in his pockets to seize the show."

CHAPTER VI.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

"WELL, well, that is bad," Nimble Nick remarked, for this was a calamity, indeed, and although he had expected it would soon occur, for he knew that the show printer had been trying to get some money out of the concern, yet now that it had come, it was none the less striking.

"Yes, pretty rough to be shipwrecked in sight of shore, so to speak, for after pulling through the worst streak of luck that I have ever seen in forty years of a showman's life to be upset now, just as the end had come, and there was a chance for me to retrieve my losses is too bad."

"I feel sorry for you, for you have done all that mortal man could do to keep the show going."

"Nick, I owe you and the rest of the boys money, of course, but I paid every cent as long as I had it."

"Oh, certainly, you have acted squarely all through."

"That has always been my platform. I have always been square with the boys; I call myself a square man, and I don't think I am lying either when I say it, but when a couple of country gillies like these Paris sharks go to jump on me, I think I am justified in playing roots on them if I can."

"I ain't setting myself up for a Sunday-school teacher, you know, and mebbe the leetle game I am going to play ain't just the cheese, but when a man gets in a tight place, on his back, say, with his opponents a-going for his very life, he ain't much to blame, according to my notion, if he strikes back in any way he can."

"Well, that is a question that I suppose each man ought to decide for himself," Nimble Nick remarked.

"It is too late, anyway, to argue the point now. I've laid out my game and must play it," Sharpley exclaimed decidedly.

"Of course you know enough of me to understand that I am not the kind of man to let a couple of countrymen skin me out of my hide and tallow without making considerable row about it."

Nimble Nick nodded.

"When I discovered that they intended to take advantage of my distress, I made up my mind that they shouldn't get the best of me if I could help it, and when I accepted their terms it was with the idea of showing them a trick or two before I got through."

"The two shows have panned out nearly nine hundred dollars. Their share is four hundred and fifty say, leaving the same amount for me, but out of mine I have paid a hundred for local bills, so all I have left is three hundred and fifty dollars to pay their four hundred dollar claims."

"That is, I am really fifty dollars behind, and though I suppose they would be willing to take all I've got and call it square, yet that don't settle the rest of the bills here and get the show across the Ohio and into Ripley."

"And now the deputy sheriff has busted everything anyway."

"I talked to the cuss and explained to him how matters stood and persuaded the galoot that it would be money in his pocket to wait until the show was over before he made his levy, for if the performance was interrupted and brought to a sudden close, as it would in all probability be if the performers got wind that the concern had been attached, the audience would be certain to raise a row and the chances were big that they would smash things generally."

"Then too I told him that all the money about eight hundred dollars, was locked up in a trunk in the ticket wagon and explained to him the nature of the agreement I had made with the Paris chaps."

"But what is the idea of locking the money in the trunk?"

"Oh, I suggested that, put the cash in a black sachel and then locked it in the trunk for safe keeping so that these sharp gillies could be sure I was giving 'em a square deal."

"And the precious pair are in that ticket wagon now a-watching of that trunk as a cat watches a mouse!"

At this point the old showman indulged in a prolonged chuckle.

"I suppose there is some little hocus-pocus about this sachel and trunk business?" Nimble Nick suggested.

"Of course I put up a job on 'em."

"It was as a juggler that I came into this 'ere show business, and I reckon I haven't forgotten how to do my old trick, although I may be a little rusty."

"There were two black saches, of course, just exactly alike, and after the money was stuffed into one I changed it for the other right afore their eyes, with the aid of a newspaper for to mask the trick."

"Then I put the dummy bag in the trunk, and they haven't the least suspicion they have been played for a couple of fools."

"The deputy sheriff, too, will be apt to swear when he goes to seize the money."

"Yes, that is likely, and he and the two sharpers can fight it out between them."

"The deputy is a little ahead in the attachment business, but it will not do him any good, for the whole outfit is mortgaged for more than it is worth, as everybody will find out when the thing gets into court."

"But to come to the wind-up; although I am going to beat the sharks in the worst kind of way, you and the boys will not be left in the lurch."

"You know what the song says:

"My boat lies low,
She lies high and dry on the O-hi-o."

"Here she is, and in about ten minutes—thanks to her—I will be on the Ohio bank of the river, where I can laugh at all the deputy sheriffs in Kentucky; that is, supposing they were smart enough to follow me, which I don't intend they shall get the chance to do."

"My mare is on the other bank. I carried her over on the ferry-boat this morning, so as to be all ready for the start to-morrow, you know."

And here the old showman chuckled in huge delight.

"There's no telegraph on the other side of the river, and even if the sharks could follow me in a legal way, I can laugh at pursuit."

"I've kept the law on my side, you know; this is my money, and hasn't been in anybody else's hands."

"A breach of contract, that's all, you know."

Nimble Nick laughed.

Despite the sharpness of the transaction, he could hardly bring himself to attach much blame to the old man.

He was only turning the countrymen's own weapons against them.

"But as I said," continued the old man, "I am going to give you and the rest of the gang the squarest kind of a deal."

Then he unwrapped the newspaper and displayed a small, black sachel.

Unlocking it, Sharpley displayed packages of bills and canvas bags of coin, all carefully put up.

"I am going to make a square divvy with you, boys," the old showman remarked, as he placed some of the packages of bills and some of the bags of coin upon the seat, and pushed them toward Nimble Nick.

"There's four hundred dollars for you to divide among the gang, share and share alike, and the rest is for me to make a fresh start somewhere."

"I think that is about the fair thing, hey?"

Nimble Nick was obliged to admit that under the circumstances he thought it was, for if the old showman had been so minded, he could have carried away the whole amount.

"I never go back on the boys if I can help it!" Sharpley declared.

"You are a square man, and I know I can trust you to do the honest thing with the rest, and I've one favor to ask of you, Nick."

"Certainly, go ahead!"

"Stick to the show, and get some of the working people to remain and look out for the property until my Cincinnati man, who has a mortgage on the stuff, can get up here."

"I will, with pleasure."

"I sent him a dispatch to-night, the moment I saw that the thing was going to bust, and he will be up on the boat which leaves Cincinnati at noon to-morrow."

"She is due here about seven in the evening. You know the party, Colonel Miles, and I wish you would meet and post him in regard to matters."

"Certainly."

"Much obliged. Lend me a hand now to put this craft into the drink!"

Nimble Nick complied with the request, and then after the skiff was launched, Sharpley shook hands with the young man.

"We will meet again, Nick, some time, and then maybe better luck will attend us."

"Take good care of yourself, and tell the boys to keep a stiff upper lip, for a light heart and a clear conscience carries a man wonderfully well through the world! Ta, ta!"

Into the boat got the showman, took up the oars and fell to work with an ease which plainly told that he was an old hand at the business.

The boat glided out into the stream. Nimble Nick watched it for a few moments until it got well out on the river, then waved his hand in a last adieu, and retraced his steps to the circus tent.

He had secreted the money about his person while employed in watching the boat, and as he strolled carelessly up to the main entrance to the tent, no one would have been apt from his manner to suspect that anything out of the common had taken place.

He reached the tent just as the show ended, and the circus men had cleared the entrance so that the crowd could get out.

As Nimble Nick approached he noticed an anxious look upon the face of the doorkeeper, who was a fat, burly fellow, the boss canvas-man of the show in fact.

Being short-handed, all connected with the concern were doing double duty.

The moment Zeke, as he was called, spied Nimble Nick he beckoned to him, and when our hero came up, Zeke said, mysteriously:

"Cully, I am afraid there is trouble ahead. Thar's a cuss who looks wolfish hanging round, and durn me if I don't have a 'spicion that he is an officer a-going to put a clamp on the show. Do you know whar the Main Guy has got to?"

"The dog is dead, Zeke, and the old man has sloped, but I've got some 'sugar' for the boys, enough to give us about twenty apiece, and we can crawl out on that."

CHAPTER VII.

THE EXPLOSION.

THE outpour of the audience from the tent at this point put an end to the conversation.

Big Zeke contented himself with nodding wisely, while a contented grin spread over his face.

Being an old hand at the business, he had foreseen that a crisis was approaching, and the intelligence did not surprise him in the least.

The absence of the "old man," coupled with the fact that the two strangers were keeping guard over the ticket-wagon and that there was a third fellow, who looked like a legal shark, prowling suspiciously around, made the boss canvas-man suspect there was mischief afoot.

It was not the first time he had witnessed the "bu'st up" of a show caused by the concern being seized, and as the experienced sailor from the looks of the sky predicts a squall, so from the appearance of things, Old Zeke felt certain there was trouble brewing.

But what affected him most was the fear that the country gillies, as the showmen always term the people of the rural districts, aided by their legal sharks, would succeeded in getting the best of the Main Guy.

Now that he learned from Nimble Nick that the old man had not only succeeded in getting out of the scrape, but had also secured the "plunder," as was plainly manifested by his leaving a "divvy" for the boys his mind was at rest.

And it was with a sardonic grin upon his fat face that he withdrew to one side in company with Nimble Nick and watched the audience come from the tent.

The deputy sheriff was one of the first to make his appearance, and he took up a position by the side of the ticket-wagon, near which the two men from Paris were also standing, gloating over the money which they had secured so easily.

"I reckon the Paris gang and this new shark ain't running in cohorts," Big Zeke suggested in Nimble Nick's ear, as he noticed the maneuver of the deputy sheriff and observed that no sign of intelligence passed between the two.

"No, this last fellow will be a surprise party to the others."

"And do they think the ducats are in the ticket wagon?"

"Yes."

"I judged so by the way they kept their peepers onto it."

"This last cuss has been standing just inside the entrance so he could keep his eyes upon it ever since he has been hanging 'round."

"When he comes to go for the wealth he will only have his labor for his pains."

"The old man has collared the ducats and sloped."

"That is the game he has played. It has been dog eat dog all around."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Miss Eglantine Dunwiddie in company with two school-girl friends, and escorted by Colonel Dunwiddie and Judge Richardson.

As it happened the party passed close to where Nimble Nick was standing and the girl improved the opportunity to speak to him.

She bade him good-evening and gave him her hand in the frankest possible manner, just as if he had been an old and valued acquaintance, much to the disgust of Colonel Dunwiddie and the amusement of the old judge, who, knowing his companion's opinion in regard to the handsome circus-rider, enjoyed his efforts to keep his temper.

"I am so sorry you are going away," Eglantine remarked.

"If you were going to remain here I should have been much pleased to have you call upon me. My house is only a mile away on the Mount Sterling pike."

"I should be delighted, Miss Dunwiddie, I assure you," Nimble Nick replied.

"Where do you go from here?"

"To Ripley."

"Oh, yes, I know, down the Ohio, and—let me see, to-morrow is Saturday."

"Yes."

"And do you remain in Ripley over Sunday?"

"We do, leaving there Monday morning."

"Perhaps I shall be able to see you again, then," Eglantine remarked, a bright smile lighting up her beautiful face.

"I have friends in Ripley, and I have been promising them a visit for some time. If it is pleasant to-morrow I think I will ride over, and then I will have the pleasure of seeing you again, and until then I will say good-by."

"I shall be delighted to see you, and I trust you will be able to come."

Then Eglantine shook hands with him again, bowed, and passed on.

It had been as much as the colonel could do to restrain his anger during the brief conversation, and if it had not been for the old judge, who was at his elbow to nudge him at a critical moment it is almost certain that his rage would have broken out.

"The girl is clean gone on him, for sure," the old lawyer remarked in the colonel's ear as Eglantine shook hands with Nimble Nick and then turned away.

"I will have to kill the scoundrel, I suppose," Dunwiddie muttered, angrily.

"Some effective measure of that sort must be adopted, I should certainly think, from the looks of things," the lawyer rejoined.

"She shall not ride to Ripley to-morrow," Dunwiddie muttered, with firm determination.

"If I cannot stop her in any other way, I will lame every horse there is on the place."

"That is the game to play; no open force, only secret cunning."

The party passed on, and as Nimble Nick watched them disappear in the distance he thought to himself that fortune, after all, was doing him a good turn when it decreed that "Sharpley's Colossal Moral Silver Show" should come to an untimely end in the town of Janesville.

The moment the audience was out the circus men proceeded to strike the tent and get everything in readiness for a move.

The boss canvas-man had consulted Nimble Nick in regard to what was best to be done, and he had counseled that everything should go on as usual.

"Put everything in order and make all snug just the same as if we were going to move in the morning," was Nimble Nick's advice.

While the breaking-up was going on, the Paris men and the deputy sheriff kept vigilant watch on the ticket-wagon, and at the same time looked around anxiously for Sharpley, and wondered what on earth had become of the Main Guy.

Pretty soon the deputy sheriff began to get nervous; the gentlemen from Paris did not know what to make of Sharpley's absence, but as they had seen the money deposited in the black sachel and securely locked in the trunk with their own eyes, they felt safe, although there was little doubt in their minds that Sharpley's absence was ominous of trouble.

They believed their spoils were all right, but fancied some other parties might be sufferers.

The presence of the deputy sheriff had not escaped their attention, and from his actions they concluded he was there for the purpose of presenting some claim against the show.

The officer waited until everything was down and pretty well packed except the stable tent where the horses were kept, and as the move was not to be made until far in the morning, this had been left to shelter the animals, then he concluded it was about time he showed his hand.

Approaching the ticket-wagon, he addressed the Paris men:

"Have you any idea where I can find Sharpley, the proprietor of this show?" the official asked.

"No, sir."

"Do you represent him?"

"Not at all."

There was something hostile about the officer's manner, and both the Paris men were bristling up.

"Well, I'm a deputy sheriff and am here to serve an attachment on this show."

The two sharks exchanged glances of alarm.

Their money was in the ticket-wagon, and that must be got out before the officer got his hands on it.

"Well, that don't matter to us, we haven't anything to do with the show, excepting that we have a sachel in the trunk in the wagon here, and we will just take that out—"

"Not much you won't!" cried the deputy sheriff. "I want you to understand that you can't take as much as a pin out of that ticket-wagon!"

"I'm just old business every time, I am, and I'm going to put my claws on everything there is connected with this establishment."

And as he finished the speech, the officer put his hand in his pocket to draw forth his legal document.

But smart as the sheriff's deputy thought himself, he was dealing with men who were fully as keen as himself—men, too, who bore the reputation of being ugly customers to tackle in their native town.

Braham, the landlord, pretended to think that the other was about to draw a weapon, and he had his revolver out, cocked and leveled at the deputy's breast in an instant.

"Don't attempt to draw no weapon on me, or I'll riddle ye!" he cried.

"Don't make a movement, or I'll play you for keeps. You hain't served no papers yet, and you ain't a-going to serve any until we get out our property."

"Spelter, h'ist inter that wagon and grab our plunder!"

The other was quick to obey, and before the officer could recover from his amazement, Spelter had secured the black sachel.

Nimble Nick now thought it was time to let the cat out of the bag.

"Hold on, gentlemen!" he cried. "That sachel is my property. If there is anything inside of it that belongs to you, take it out, but don't carry off my sachel!"

And, with cocked and leveled revolver, the circus-rider advanced.

"We don't want yer sachel, only our plunder!" Spelter replied, contemptuously, then he opened the sachel, and when he found it stuffed with newspapers, with a brick for weight, the rage of the pair was unbounded.

They swore they would murder the tricky showman, and departed to hunt him up.

The sheriff's deputy attached the property, and employed the circus men to help him take care of it.

Our hero divided the money among the "gang," and all except Nimble Nick, Old Zeke and his assistants took the night boat for Cincinnati.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DARK SCHEME.

EGLANTINE had come to the show in the family carriage, stopping to pick up her two friends, who resided just on the outskirts of the town, on the way.

The colonel and the judge escorted the ladies to the vehicle, and then proceeded to the principal restaurant of the town, which was in the basement of the hotel, for the purpose of refreshing the inner man with some oysters, washed down with a bottle of good wine, both of the gentlemen being noted for their love of creature comforts.

There were a couple of small private rooms at the back of the saloon which were especially reserved for such high-toned patrons.

There were two more "distinguished citizens"

slaking their thirst at the bar when the colonel and judge entered.

Of course after the manner of true Kentucky gentlemen, nothing would do but the new-comers must join them.

In return the others invited the pair to have some oysters with them, and then cards were introduced and a little game of draw poker was indulged in.

Just a little harmless game, "a quarter ante," to while the time away, no gambling for big money, and about one o'clock the party broke up, none of them being much better or worse off as far as their pocketbooks were concerned for their little amusement.

Upon coming to the outer apartment and ranging up along the bar for a private bottle of wine for a nightcap, they were joined by the landlord of the hotel, who had descended to the lower regions for a similar purpose.

"Well, captain, I suppose you have had a busy day of it with your circus crowd?" the colonel observed to the landlord.

"And I presume you are not sorry they are gone, although no doubt you have made money out of them."

"Not much I hain't," responded the landlord, with a grimace.

"I reckon you haven't heard the news."

"Eh, what news?" exclaimed the colonel, and the others repeated the question, crowding around the landlord.

"Why, the concern is busted, and the manager has cut and run with the funds, and the sheriff has levied on the property."

This was a startler, and all the gentlemen expressed their astonishment.

"What has become of the circus people—the performers?" asked Dunwiddie, who had become impressed with the idea that this event might be the means of detaining Nimble Nick in Janesville, which did not suit him at all.

"Oh, they have all cleared out with the exception of a few who have been employed by the officer who seized the concern, to attend to the animals.

"They didn't stick me any, for their individual bills did not amount to much, and they all stepped up to the captain's office and settled like gentlemen."

"All gone?"

"Yes, they caught the Cincinnati packet, the Magnolia, you know, which touches here between twelve and one. The boys had a little money, it seems, and were able to get away."

"I reckon from what I heard some of them say, that the manager left a few dollars for them before he lit out; one of them said to another, that if it had not been for the bareback rider, Nick Monday, they wouldn't have got a cent, so I suppose he struck the manager and made him shell out."

"He is the only one of the performers who has remained behind."

This was extremely unwelcome intelligence and Dunwiddie had hard work to conceal the annoyance he felt.

"Why didn't he go with the rest?" the judge asked carelessly, just as though he was putting the question for the sake of saying something, and not because he really cared anything about the matter.

"Well, he told me that he wasn't in any particular hurry to get another engagement, and thought he would lay off for a while and take it easy."

"I judge from the way he speaks that he has plenty of money, and, in fact, when he paid me to-night he took the bills from a roll about as big as a brick."

"He's a star rider, you know, and those fellows get big money, two and three hundred dollars a week I have heard."

The colonel looked glum for it seemed to him as if there was a strong probability that Nimble Nick had remained behind for the purpose of entrapping his niece.

One of the other gentlemen, whose tongue was loosened by the liquor which he had imbibed, thought he saw a fine chance for a joke, having attended the circus on both afternoon and evening and noticed the interest which Eglantine Dunwiddie manifested in the young rider.

Nimble Nick's rescue of the girl had been the talk of the town and the gossips, always quick to magnify trifles, had commented freely upon the rider.

"I tell you what it is, colonel!" exclaimed the gentleman with a knowing smile.

"This circus chap has got his eye on your niece. He saved her life, you know, and being a good-looking fellow he reckons that if he holds on for a while here maybe he can make a match with her."

"These circus men always capture the girls, for they have a mighty taking way with them."

The landlord and the other gentlemen smiled, for by the angry look upon Dunwiddie's face they saw that he did not relish the idea at all.

"Bah!" the colonel exclaimed; "the scoundrel had better mind what he is about. I reckon he will find this town entirely too hot for him if he tries any game of the kind."

"Don't be angry, colonel, at me for suggesting such a thing," the joker remarked; "but I give you my word they are talking about it all over town. You know what Janesville is: when a little thing of this kind gets started it goes like wildfire. You see, your niece throwing the fellow the posies gave the gossips the cue."

"Young girls will do such thoughtless things, of course," the colonel remarked.

But as for taking any interest in the fellow, beyond feeling much obliged to him for coming to her aid when her horse ran away, she could not possibly do it.

"My niece is a lady, and would never even dream of having a love affair with a low-bred scamp of a circus-rider."

"Don't be offended at me, colonel," the joker exclaimed.

"I am only repeating what has been said. Why, this evening, as I was coming out of the show with Major Perkins—you know the major, of course?"

Dunwiddie nodded.

"Well, the major saw Miss Eglantine stop to speak to the rider—we were just behind you—and he became very indignant, not at your niece, you know, but at the showman for daring to put himself in her way, for the major jumped to the conclusion that the fellow was waiting at the entrance for the express purpose of getting her to notice him, and he said that most certainly, as an old friend of the family, he would have taken it upon himself to quietly inform the circus fellow that he mustn't do such a thing again, but for the fear you would think he was interfering in your family matters."

"The major is a hot-blooded old fellow," the other gentleman observed.

"And I do not doubt in the least that he was just dying to make the showman crawl."

"Oh, yes, the major is a warrior," continued the joker.

"A regular fire-eater, you know; and he is never so happy as when engaged in a personal affair with some one."

"He would make this circus fellow take water now, you bet!"

"Oh, the idea is absurd!" the colonel exclaimed. "Even if this circus rascal does remain in Janesville he will never dare to lift his eyes to my niece; and I hope, gentlemen, that you will not say anything more in regard to the matter, for it is extremely distasteful to me."

Of course this decided declaration put an end to all further conversation upon the subject.

The wine was finished, and the party broke up.

But when Dunwiddie and the judge got upon their homeward road the colonel brought up the affair again.

"What do you think, judge, of this scoundrel remaining in the town?"

"Oh, there isn't the least doubt in my mind in regard to his intention."

"You think he is after Eglantine?"

"No doubt about it."

Dunwiddie reflected for a moment and then exclaimed:

"I believe you are right."

"Most certainly! He sees that the girl has taken an interest in him and there isn't any mistake about that."

"No, that is true. These women are as unreliable and fickle as weathercocks."

"The man would be a fool not to go in and try to win such a prize."

"Oh yes, that is natural enough."

"Of course, the chances are great that some busybody has told him all about the girl—how she is independently wealthy and not engaged to any one, and he sees there is a fine opening to land a big stake if he has only the courage to go in for it."

"He'd better be careful how he goes about it or the attempt may cost him his life!" cried Dunwiddie angrily.

"That talk in the saloon to-night has given me an idea."

"What is it?"

"About the major you know. If I go to him and say that some gentleman of the town ought to warn this rider to be careful how he throws himself in Miss Dunwiddie's way, and that I

feel sure you would consider it the act of a friend, he will jump at the idea."

"Yes, no doubt."

"The major always goes heeled you know and is very quick on the draw."

"Why, it is a hundred to one that he picks a quarrel with and lays the fellow out."

"A capital scheme!" exclaimed the colonel, rubbing his hands together warmly to express his satisfaction.

"I'll work it to-morrow," observed the judge.

"All right, the sooner the better, and the beauty of the thing is I will not be mixed up in the matter at all."

The scheme was a good one beyond a doubt.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning.

Nick had been down to the tent and given the boys a hand, for the show had run down so that there wasn't really men enough to take care of the stock without calling upon the performers to help the working-people out.

Nick was an early riser, and was generally one of the first at the breakfast-table, so he usually made his appearance at the tent earlier than any of the rest of the performers—a fact which had won for him the esteem of all the working-people.

And then, too, although he was as good a performer as there was in the show, in fact nearly all of the audience thought he was the best, for he was the cleanest and neatest tumbler in the ring, and as a rider he could more than hold his own, for he could do a fair bare-back act—that is, ride without saddle or pad, after the style of the great James Melville—which was more than any other rider in the show could accomplish, although all of them practiced daily in order to do the trick.

Most of them were able to stick on all right, but they could not ride with the dash and vim which Nick displayed.

And in all equestrian acts, or in any exhibition which depends upon human strength and adroitness, the manner in which the "trick" is done goes a great way toward success.

As we have said, after performing his share of the work Nimble Nick resumed his natty attire, which he had laid aside so that it might not be soiled, assuming a rough suit of clothes for the nonce, and sallied out for a walk.

He proceeded up the main street toward the center of the village, attracting admiring glances from the ladies and curious ones from the men as he proceeded.

Almost everybody in the village had attended the shows given by the party, and so the brilliant young performer was recognized by about every person he encountered.

There is a charm attached to all these public performers, particularly to dashy ones of the Nimble Nick stamp, and it was little wonder that he attracted almost universal notice.

Nick paid but little attention, though, to the glances, although when he happened to catch sight of a pretty girl gazing with curious eyes upon him, he felt in duty bound to take a second look at the maiden as he passed so as to make sure that she was as pretty as she appeared at the first glance.

Some of the young bucks of the town happening to notice this, were rather inclined to resent the harmless glance, but when Nimble Nick caught sight of these scowling faces, he smiled disdainfully, and a peculiar look appeared in his dark eyes which seemed to say:

"What are you going to do about it?"

And not one of the bucks who caught this look and understood what it meant seemed anxious to accept the challenge.

It was the old story over again of the mice and the cat.

There wasn't in their minds the least doubt that the cat ought to be belled—the stranger should be stopped from casting sheep's-eyes at the village beauties, but the question was: who was to do the job? and each and every man thought that his neighbors would make a better fist at it than himself.

When Nick reached the principal side-street of the town, which, running from the river, crossed the main street at right angles, the latter running parallel with the stream, he halted for a moment, uncertain which way to go, whether to keep on as he was going or turn down the cross-street to the Ohio and stroll along either up or down its bank.

The corner where he had halted was in the center of the town, the general loafing-place of the idlers who held up the awning-posts and "swapped lies," as their fathers and grandfathers had before them on the self-same corner.

There was a liquor saloon there, the principal one in the town after the hotel bars.

Nick paid no attention to the fact that there was a saloon there—for he rarely touched liquor—except to notice the little knot of loungers congregated in front of it, and was just about to pass on, having concluded not to go down to the river, when a stranger suddenly came out of the saloon and planted himself right in the way of our hero, so that it was not possible for him to advance without running into the man.

The new-comer was a man who was not old, nor could he be called young, about forty, or forty-five, or thereabouts.

He was of medium height, but so portly that he appeared to be shorter than he really was; had a fiery red face, smoothly shaven, with the exception of a red chin-piece of straggling hair, which looked for all the world like the beard of a Billy goat.

A great shock of rebellious hair of the same "auburn" hue covered his head—hair which insisted upon standing on end, and which neither comb nor brush could subdue.

He was dressed in a suit of black, which at a little distance off looked quite respectable, but upon a close inspection signs of long wear and hard usage could be discerned, for it was rusty and threadbare.

No better known man was there for a hundred miles around than this personage.

By profession he was a lawyer, by inclination a politician, but his unsteadiness—a harder drinker could not be found in the town—prevented him from doing much in either line.

But being the recipient of a regular annuity, left him by a wealthy relative, whose favorite in his young and salad days he had been, but who had sense enough to see that the young man, owing to his unsteadiness, would never make much of a mark in the world—this party was determined that his brilliant relation should never come to actual want, and so, instead of leaving him the money which he had always intended to give him outright, he settled an annuity upon him.

Thanks to this circumstance, the gentleman was free to follow the bent of his own sweet will.

The attitude of the man seemed decidedly offensive as he placed himself directly in the way of the young rider, so that it was impossible for him to proceed without stepping on him.

Now, while Nick was expert in all kinds of manly exercises, and as a boxer and wrestler able to hold his own with any man of his weight and inches on earth, yet he was not in the least inclined to be quarrelsome, and though, since he had come to man's estate, he had been involved in some personal difficulties, yet in each and every case the trouble had been forced upon him, and he would have avoided it if it had been possible for him to have done so without showing the white feather.

But to retreat in a cowardly manner was something that he could not bring himself to do.

And on this occasion, when the man planted himself in the path in such a decidedly offensive manner, after taking a glance at his face and coming to the conclusion from the flush appearing on it, that the man was under the influence of liquor and therefore not really accountable for what he was doing, Nick moved to the outside so as to pass near the curbstone.

But the other immediately stepped toward the curbstone also, so as to block the way.

After this movement it was impossible to mistake the intentions of the stranger.

He intended to pick a quarrel.

Nick had his riding-whip in his hand, and as it was always his custom when he found that a difficulty could not be avoided, to "go in" and make it as "red-hot" for his opponent as possible, he had it in his mind to cut the offensive stranger across the face with it in a way that would be apt to bring tears to his eyes, but then the fact that the other was an older man than himself, and, possibly, was so much under the influence of liquor as not to know exactly what he was about, restrained him.

He could not refrain from giving utterance to the thoughts which were in his mind though.

"My friend, if you don't get out of my way I shall have to walk over you, and by the time I have finished that little operation I don't think you will feel as well as you do now," he remarked, speaking quite pleasantly, and as if he regarded the whole affair as a joke.

The face of the stranger grew redder and he puffed out his cheeks and appeared to be very indignant.

"You walk over me, sah!" he cried, speaking with the slight accent so common with many whites of the Southern States, brought up from infancy in close contact with the negroes.

"Yes, that is what I said," Nimble Nick replied. "You musn't get in a man's way if you object to being walked over."

"You walk over me, sah, great heavens!" and he cast his eyes upward as if he expected that some celestial messenger would immediately descend for the purpose of preventing any such outrage being performed.

"Walk over me, sah?" and he put the inquiry this time in the form of a question as though he really doubted whether the young man knew what he had said.

"Yes, that is it—that is what I said and what I will do unless you get out of the way. Do you suppose I am going to stand here and look at your ugly mug until you choose to depart?"

"My ugly mug!" howled the stranger, now fairly purple with rage.

"That is what I said! What is the matter with you—are you deaf that you seem to have so much difficulty in comprehending my good, plain United States talk?"

"Do you know who I am, sah—do you know who I am?" exclaimed the other in so loud a tone and gesticulating so wildly with both hands as to attract the attention of every idler in the street.

"Nary time! You have the dead wood on me there."

CHAPTER X.

THE MAJOR.

THE altercation had caused every one within hearing distance to stop and listen, but, unlike the crowd who in an Eastern town, when attracted by such a thing, always evince an inclination to get as near to the disputants as possible, as though they feared they should miss some of the dialogue, the bystanders in this case kept at a respectful distance.

This conduct was due to the fact that when disputes of this kind arise in the public street in the South or Southwest they generally end with a shooting match.

Instead of resorting to their fists when words fail, the antagonists usually draw either knives or pistols, and go for each other with the ferocity of bulldogs.

If the bystanders were near at hand they would stand a chance of getting damaged before they could scatter, and so, usually, are not inclined to "crowd the mourners."

"I will inform you, sah, who I am, and then you will see, sah, that the idea that any such low vagabond as you are can walk over a gentleman like myself is perfectly ridiculous."

The effect of this speech was to cause a wild desire to "smack" the face of the boaster until the tears came out of his eyes to spring up in the heart of Nimble Nick, but he restrained himself, determined to allow the stranger a chance to tell who and what he was.

His first idea that the man was a crank who was not quite right in his upper story did not seem to be borne out by the expression which the faces of the bystanders wore, for though there was a sort of grin upon the features of some of the loafer-like fellows, yet the faces of the respectable citizens who had halted, attracted by the discussion, looked serious, as though they anticipated that there was trouble ahead.

So Nick kept his temper, and made answer:

"Well, as to being a vagabond, that is a subject which is open to discussion; but suppose you unfold yourself. I begin to feel a curiosity to know the name of the cock who is crowing so loudly."

"I want you to understand, sah, that when I crow in this town, the rooster that answers me must be well bearded with steel and ready for war!" the other declared, pompously.

"If you can fight as well as you can brag about it, you must be a terror!" Nimble Nick retorted.

"My name, sah, is Perkins, Major Perkins, sah, Major Adrastus Pebian Perkins, and I'm a corn-fed Kentuckian from the dark and bloody ground."

"You're a good-sized man," Nimble Nick remarked, reflectively, surveying the other in a critical sort of way. "And you ought to be, when you have to carry a name like that around with you."

"Say, are you any relation of old Si Perkins, the poorhouse keeper at Marblehead, Massachusetts?"

This simple question inflamed the rage of the stranger still more.

"You impertinent scoundrel!" he roared.

"How dare you suppose that I am any connection of any infernal blue-bellied Yankee?"

"I'm a Southern gentleman, I am, sah."

"Poorhouse keeper! You must be crazy."

"Well, I didn't know; you favor each other."

He is about as mean a hog as walks the earth, and I calculate you ain't much better, although you are acting as if you were the cock of the walk in this burg."

"I want you to understand, sah, that I am a perfect gentleman!" the other asserted, shaking his finger warningly in Nimble Nick's face.

"And when I, Major A. Pebian Perkins, get upon the war-path, I make Rome howl."

"Oh, you're a howler, eh?" rejoined our hero, with perfect coolness.

The major was much annoyed at this observation, but he resolved not to take any notice of it, for he had a communication to deliver to the young stranger, and he did not intend to let the other provoke him to action until he was ready.

"I am a Kentuckian, sah!" again he declared. "And like the majority of the gentlemen of my State, I am a dead-shot—I can snuff a candle, sah, at ten paces, and I want you to understand that when there is a lady in the case, Major A. Pebian Perkins will never be found wanting!"

All this had been given in the most high-flown manner, and at this point, the major, who was short-winded, stopped to take breath.

For the first time Nimble Nick began to have a suspicion in regard to the motive which had induced the stranger to accost him.

By daring to indulge in the luxury of a flirtation with the gay and dashing belle of Janesville, Eglantine Dunwiddie, he had aroused the wrath of two-thirds of the men in the town.

"I am a Kentucky gentleman, sah, and I don't want you to forget it," continued the major having recovered his breath.

"Well, as you have told me about a dozen times already, the fact ought to be well-grounded in my memory, but then can I depend upon the truth of the statement?"

And Nimble Nick put the question in the most serious manner.

Perkins fairly gasped with anger, and for a moment it looked as if his indignation would choke him.

"Aha! you insult me, young man!" he cried, as soon as he got his breath.

"Such a question was never put to me before. My word has never been doubted. But I will come to the point at once."

"You, sah, a stranger in our town—a traveling showman has dared to lift your eyes to one of our ladies; a young lady, sah, whose shoes you are not worthy to untie—"

"Maybe they button, no shoestrings, you know," ejaculated Nimble Nick, with the gravest possible face.

"It doesn't make any difference, sah, you are not worthy to attend to them anyway, and I have taken it upon myself to speak to you in regard to this matter."

"Excuse the question, but what business is it of yours?" Nimble Nick asked, bluntly.

"It is the duty of every Kentucky gentleman to look after the ladies," replied the major, pompously.

As the old song says:

"Send for us Kentucky boys,
And we'll protect your ladies."

"In that spirit, sah, I am called upon to interfere in the matter. Besides, Miss Eglantine Dunwiddie is a distant connection of my family, and that gives me the right to."

"Now, colonel—"

"Major, sah!" interrupted the other.

"Major A. Pebian Perkins."

"Well, Major, then; don't you think you are rushing things just a little? Because I happened by accident to make the acquaintance of a young lady is there any necessity for kicking up a row about it?"

"Not at all, sah, if the matter stops just where it is. If you will give me your promise never to see the young lady again that is all I require," and the major waved his right hand in a dignified way as he delivered the ultimatum.

Now Nimble Nick was a patient fellow; years filled with toil, and struggles, and hardships, had taught him the wisdom of always keeping a perfect control over his temper, but on the present occasion it was a difficult matter for him to live up to his will under the circumstances.

"And supposing I don't choose to agree to these conditions, as the young lady is of age and appears to be abundantly able to take care of herself?" our hero asked, as unconcerned as possible, vailing the anger which he felt in the most skillful manner.

"Then, sah, I shall be obliged to chastise you," the major replied, again waving his hand as though he was engaged in delivering a stump oration.

"Oh, you will chastise me, eh?"

"Yes, sah; if you were a gentleman, sah, I would call you out and perforate your ignoble carcass with a bullet, but as a challenge would only be wasted on such a man as you are, I must content myself with slapping your ears."

"It is lucky for you that you are not a gentleman for your life wouldn't be worth an hour's purchase out in the field opposed to me."

Nimble Nick had heard enough and came to the conclusion it was about time to show this loud-talking stranger that he had got hold of the wrong customer when he attempted to brow-beat him.

"Major Perkins, I do not wish to flatter you," he observed as quietly and coolly as possible, "but in my opinion you are the champion liar."

"What, sah?" cried the other, recoiling as the epithet reached his ears as though he had received a blow in the face.

"And the biggest donkey I ever encountered!" continued Nimble Nick.

"You impudent scoundrel!" roared the major at the top of his lungs, and then he made a rush at our hero, who, expecting such a movement, was prepared for it.

The bystanders, knowing the major so well, were not astonished by the attack, for they had anticipated it from the beginning.

From the moment that the major emerged from the saloon and placed himself in such a significant manner in front of the young man they understood he was on the "war-path."

But his attack upon the young man with his fists astonished them, for, as a rule, whenever the major "picked a fuss" with any one, he either drew a pistol or plucked out a knife and proceeded to carve his opponent in the good old Southwestern fashion.

In this case, however, his rage at the insulting epithet bestowed upon him by the young man was so great that he never paused to reflect upon which would be the best way to chastise the bold speaker.

His only idea was to get hold of him and so wreak immediate vengeance.

He never took the trouble to calculate that the odds in a personal encounter at close quarters were decidedly in favor of his antagonist, for a bulky man of forty odd, who for years had taken little part in any violent exercises, stood but little chance when pitted against a muscular young fellow of twenty-five, all bone and muscle, without an ounce of useless fat upon him.

A man in as good condition as though he had been trained for the prize ring.

CHAPTER XI.

NICK MAKES THE FIRE-EATER DANCE.

THE major rushed at Nick with the idea of closing in with him but our hero knew a trick worth two of that and as his antagonist rushed at him he jumped nimbly to one side, dodged under the arm of the other, stuck out his foot, and his antagonist tripping over fell headlong to the pavement.

Nick was quick to improve the advantage he had gained.

Hardly was the major on the ground—and he went down flat on his face in the clumsiest possible way—when Nimble Nick was after him.

Our hero had determined to give the boaster who had so wantonly attacked him a lesson which he would be apt to remember for a long time.

If there was anything in the world that the young showman despised it was one of these southern-western bragging "fire-eaters."

His object was not so much to punish the bully by administering to him a sound thrashing, as to humiliate him by putting the brag-gart through a "course of sprouts" which would render him the laughing-stock of the town.

And in the brief period of time which had elapsed between the major's attack and his downfall, Nimble Nick had thought out a plan.

The fire-eater was half-stunned by the shock when he came down so suddenly and before he had a chance to recover, Nimble Nick placed his right foot under the waist of the prostrate man and with a dexterous shove rolled him from the sidewalk into the street.

And then, applying first one foot and then the other, Nimble Nick rolled the major, just as if he had been a barrel, up the dusty street.

The major's fat and scantiness of breath operated against his attempts to get out of his unpleasant position.

Every time he attempted to get up Nimble Nick, with a dexterous kick, would topple

him over on his back and set him to going again.

The major raved and he swore until the foam fairly came from his mouth, and then his breath commenced to give out, and the dust, which now covered him from head to foot, got into his mouth and choked his utterance.

The spectators roared with laughter, for although the major was a fellow-townsmen, and his conqueror a stranger, yet as they realized that Perkins was not suffering any material damage, and the scene was really ridiculous, no one ventured to interfere, and all laughed heartily at the absurd sight.

The major's revolver slipped out of his pocket, then a bowie-knife followed suit, and Nimble Nick hastened to secure both.

Then he stopped playing football with his antagonist, and allowed him to get on his feet.

The major rose, very much the worse for wear, and puffing and blowing like a porpoise—gained his feet only to find himself "covered" by his own revolver, leveled by the hand of the man whom he had so willfully attacked.

The fire-eater was like a man dazed as he looked into the muzzle of the leveled revolver and then at the determined eyes of his opponent.

There was no mistaking the fact that the young man meant "business," and the fire-eater was good judge enough of human nature to understand this.

Nimble Nick had raised the hammer of the weapon, and it was plain to all that it needed but the slight pressure of his finger upon the trigger to discharge it and send the ball straight to the heart of Major Perkins.

Despite his pompous, vain-glorious way, the major was no coward, but, on the contrary, had a deal of the desperado about him; but on this present occasion the experience through which he had just passed had the effect of taking the steel completely out of him.

The man, for the time being, was completely and utterly cowed.

"For heaven's sake, don't shoot!" he cried, in a husky voice.

"Why shouldn't I kill you?" Nimble Nick demanded sternly. "You have forced this quarrel upon me without the slightest provocation, and I should be perfectly justified in putting a hole through you. I don't desire your death, though, but as you have seen fit to denounce me as a vagabond because I gain my living by amusing the public, I intend to place you on an equality with me in that respect by forcing you to exhibit your gifts in that line."

"Can you sing?"

The abrupt question astounded the major, and he gazed at the young man open-mouthed, for he hadn't the slightest conception of why the question was asked.

"Don't stand there with your mouth open as if you were going into the fly-trap business!" cried our hero.

"Gather yourself together, old man, and be lively! Can you sing?"

"Sing what?" exclaimed the other, gazing at the questioner as though he believed the other had taken leave of his senses.

"Anything, don't matter what—anything from Old Hundred down to Jump, Jim Crow."

"I am not at all particular; I'm fond of all kinds of music."

"I never sung a note in my life!" the major replied.

"You are singing small on this occasion, though," Nimble Nick replied.

"But if you can't sing, perhaps you can dance."

"Dance!" ejaculated the Kentuckian in wonder.

"Yes, dance; don't I speak plain enough? Virginia reel and all that sort of thing."

"Oh, yes, sah, when it comes to the light, fantastic toe, I flatter myself I can shake a leg with any man south of the Ohio, although I am not as young now as I used to be."

The major was speaking the truth, and not boasting this time.

He was noted for his ball-going, and few hops ever occurred in the neighborhood without Major Perkins being one of the party.

"The polka is my favorite dance. Can you dance the polka?" demanded Nimble Nick, abruptly.

"Dance the polka? Yes, sah, I can."

"Dance then; I'll hum a tune for you. Dance, or I'll drill a hole right through you, as sure as my name is Nick Monday!"

The major was just on the point of refusing, in the most indignant manner, to do anything of the kind, when he happened to glance into the eyes of his antagonist and he saw "shoot" so visibly written there that his heart quailed.

The major was no coward; he had earned the right to be called a fire-eater, but he was not hero enough to court certain death.

And the rough and ridiculous way in which he had been handled by the other, had thoroughly taken the steel out of him; and so when Nick began to hum a polka, the major commenced to caper, the circus man beating time with his whip, having changed the revolver to his left hand, and allowed it to rest against his side.

The bystanders looked on in amazement, a broad grin on every face.

A more laughable sight was never seen on the streets of Janesville.

The major was all out of breath when he began to dance, and he could continue but a couple of minutes and then paused exhausted.

"All right, I am quite satisfied," Nimble Nick remarked in the gravest possible manner, making a polite bow as he spoke.

"If fame with her hundred tongues ever dares to say that you cannot cut a pigeon-wing equal to any man in the State of Kentucky, then I shall take great pleasure in contradicting the assertion, for you are a champion in that line."

"Now, sir, you are at liberty to depart, and I am highly pleased that I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

Then Nimble Nick made the major a grave bow and proceeded up the street, leaving the other a prey to the most intense astonishment.

The major remained as if he was rooted to the spot until Nimble Nick got out of sight, then, with a deep sigh, he picked up his hat which had fallen from his hand, replaced it, in his amazement never noticing that it was covered with dust, and re-entered the saloon.

The jolly, fat fellow who ran the drinking place had witnessed the affair from the beginning through one of the saloon windows, and although he was an intimate friend of Major Perkins, yet he was not sorry to see him taken down a peg.

For the major had made such a reputation as a fire-eater that the most of the townsmen were rather afraid of him, and as a natural consequence he put on considerable frills, to use the southwestern saying.

It was the old story of the bully over again; he bragged of what a mighty warrior he was until most people believed that it was true, without requiring to be convinced by deeds.

Nimble Nick had punctured the bubble though, and had shown the people of Janesville that Major Perkins could "take water" and "crawfish" as well as the biggest coward in the town when he got in a tight place.

"For heaven's sake give me something to drink!" the major exclaimed as he tottered into the saloon and sunk almost breathless in a chair.

"Certainly, of course!" cried the host, hastening to provide the liquid refreshment that the major craved.

"Oh, this is a terrible affair. I am disgraced forever!" the discomfited bully moaned.

"No, no, nothing of the kind; he took you by surprise, and any man is liable to weaken under such circumstances!" the host declared, anxious for some more fun.

"Do you think the public at large, sah, will regard it in that way?" the other asked, a gleam of hope appearing in his eyes.

"Undoubtedly! You must go for the fellow again. You must challenge the rascal, major!"

"I will!" cried the other, immediately assuming a warlike air.

"I will challenge the scoundrel immediately!" Richard was himself again!

"Get me pen, ink, and paper and I will indite an epistle to him at once. By jingo! he must meet me on the field of honor, and I will shoot him, sah, begad!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE CHALLENGE.

THE saloon-keeper hastened to bring writing-materials, and invited the major to walk into his private apartment, which was in the rear of the bar-room.

"Better go into my room, major," he said. "You will find a table there, so you will be able to write without any trouble and be quiet, too, while you are liable to be disturbed here, for some of the boys are sure to come in presently for to see how you are."

"Very likely—very likely!" and the fire-eater groaned at the idea.

"Billy, my boy, I have never been so rudely treated since I was hatched—the infernal, low-lived hound!"

And the major waxed indignant as he reflected upon the easy triumph the showman had achieved.

"Begad, sah, the dirty dog used me as a foot-ball—wiped the street with my carcass just the same as though I was some condemned nigger!"

"Well, you see, he got the advantage of you in the beginning—took you by surprise, you know."

"By surprise!" cried the major.

"As I am a gentleman, Billy, I was so amazed at his rude and ungentlemanly treatment that I was really dazed."

"Yes, sah, I was out of my head, begad!"

"Oh, certainly; any one could see that with half an eye."

"But now I will have revenge! I will show him how a Southern gentleman revenges such an insult."

"I will call him, out and then shoot him so quick, begad, that it will make his head swim!"

"Suppose you can't get him out?" suggested the saloon-keeper.

"Suppose that he does not have the pluck to accept your challenge?"

"Egad! I never thought of that."

"He's a Northerner, you know, and some of those mudsills don't take kindly to the notion of a duel."

"That is very true; I have heard of some of the low-lived rascals being so contemptible as to refuse a gentleman's demand for satisfaction, but do you know, Billy, I have hardly been able to believe that such a thing could be true."

"Oh, it is a sure enough fact, there isn't the least doubt about it," the other asserted.

"They don't go much on the duel up in the North, I understand, and this fellow having got the best of you, may refuse to come out and be shot like a gentleman."

"Well, I will give him the chance to refuse anyway, and if he does, I will get my double-barreled shot-gun and show him a Southern trick which will be apt to open his eyes."

"Better slope, major; here's some of the boys coming, and I reckon they are going to drop in."

Perkins rose in a hurry.

Above all things in this world he dreaded the potent power of ridicule, and being conscious that in his late encounter with the circus man, he had been forced to cut a most absurd figure, he felt certain that his acquaintances would be apt to joke him in regard to the matter in the most disagreeable manner.

"I will get out!" he exclaimed.

"I feel that the condemned scoundrel has made a laughing-stock of me for the whole town, and until I get a chance to wipe out the insult by his blood, I am not anxious to see any of the boys, for I know they would roast me in the most complete manner."

"No doubt—no doubt!" exclaimed the saloon-keeper, in a sympathizing tone, although at the same time he was laughing in his sleeve at the comical picture of misery which the portly major presented.

"I will remain in seclusion until I get a chance to look at this insolent and dirty dog, over the sights of a firearm, and then I will teach him that he cannot use a Kentucky gentleman to mop the streets with."

"Begad! I am almost choked with the dust. Send a boy, by the way, to Judge Richardson, and tell him I wish to see him."

"For your second, eh?" questioned the other.

"Yes, the judge will act for me. He is a particular friend of the Dunwiddies and, of course, when he learns how the trouble arose, he will be glad to oblige me."

The major did not deem it necessary to inform the other that if it had not been for the judge's "egging on" he would never have taken it into his head to call the stranger to an account, all his boastings in regard to what he had a good mind to do being mere idle words, "full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing."

"All right! I'll have the judge hunted up immediately."

"You couldn't strike a better man to act for you in such an affair in the whole State of Kentucky."

"True, sah, begad!"

And then the major retreated precipitately for some of the "boys" were at the door.

The new-comers entered just as the major disappeared.

As Perkins had expected, they came for the express purpose of having a laugh at his expense.

The saloon-keeper, however, put on a serious face, and shook his head gravely when they asked after the major, merriment sparkling in their eyes.

"Now, you must go slow, boys," he remarked

in reply to their questions; "this is going to be mighty serious business now, and no mistake. It has commenced in a farce, but I reckon before it gets through it will turn into a first-class tragedy."

Then he paused in his speech to dispatch his negro boy with instructions to hunt up Judge Richardson and bring him to the saloon as soon as possible, and after the boy had departed on his mission, he explained to the young men what was coming.

"The major was taken at a disadvantage and completely dazed, gentlemen, or this would never have happened as it did," he explained; "for you all know, boys, that the major isn't any slouch when it comes to war."

"I have known him for thirty years, and this is the first time I ever knew him to crawl. Of course he got a mighty rough deal, and when it comes, gentlemen, to getting a man into a game that he don't understand, it is mighty apt to throw him off his balance at first."

"When it comes to a shooting match, though, the major will be there, every time!" one of the party observed.

"Gentlemen, a man would be safe in betting a farm on that!" the saloon-keeper assented, with due solemnity.

"The major is in the room there writing a challenge, and I've just sent for Judge Richardson, as you know, to carry the thing. The circus chap has had his fun, and now the major proposes to have a little amusement out of the affair, and if the showman has courage enough to face the music—and I reckon he will have that same, for he seems a nifty kind of chap—if the major don't show him a little Kentucky marksmanship, which will be apt to astonish his weak nerves, then I'm no prophet."

After this announcement, all the party indulged in a "smile," and then the young men hurried away, eager to convey the news, so that in a very short time, indeed, the intelligence that the major was going to avenge the affront which had been put upon him, by challenging the circus-rider to mortal combat, was the common property of the town.

The negro boy succeeded in finding Judge Richardson without any trouble, and as the lad, with the natural tendency of his race to circulating startling news, took it upon himself to post the lawyer in regard to all that had occurred, by the time the judge reached the saloon he not only knew all, but also had a good idea of why his presence was desired.

The major had his challenge all ready when the judge was ushered into the room, and delivered it to him with the injunction to seek out Nimble Nick immediately, as he was hungry for revenge.

"I ask you to act for me, judge," he said, in conclusion, "because I have perfect confidence in your wisdom, and I know, too, that no man in the State of Kentucky has a better knowledge of the code than yourself."

The judge bowed at the compliment.

"One suggestion I would make, major," he remarked, after a moment's thought. "By sending this challenge you give the fellow the choice of weapons, you know."

"Certainly; of course I am aware of that; but it matters not. It will be either pistols or rifles, of course, and I flatter myself I am an expert with either."

After a few more words of slight importance, the judge departed on his mission.

Going straight to the hotel, he found that the young man was not in, and so took a seat to wait his return.

In a short time he came in, and the judge made known his mission.

"Why, isn't the major satisfied?" Nick asked, with a quizzical air.

"Well, upon my word, he is about as big a glutton in this respect as I have ever encountered. But I am one of the most obliging of men, and am ready to accommodate him."

"If you will kindly name your friend, I will confer with him in regard to the details of the meeting," the judge remarked.

"A friend? Let me see," observed young Monday, reflectively. "Being a stranger in the town, friends are rather scarce articles with me at present."

Just at this point the landlord, jolly old Captain Peters, entered the office.

"Ah! maybe the captain will oblige me?"

Calling the host, Nick explained what was wanted, and he readily consented.

"As the challenged party, you have the right of time, place and weapons," the host remarked.

"This afternoon; the place you can select better than I," Nick replied.

"And as for weapons—"

At this point he hesitated, and his eyes fell upon a pair of German student rapiers behind the counter, which had been left in pawn by an actor in hard luck and which the landlord had produced with the hope of selling them to Nick, and the idea flashed into his head that, by choosing swords, the major would be bothered, for, though there was not much doubt about his skill with firearms, the odds were great that he was not an expert swordsman.

The judge was taken by surprise at this decision.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DUEL.

THIS decision was so entirely unexpected by Judge Richardson, that he felt called upon to protest against it.

"Of course, as the challenged party, you have the right to name the weapons; but will you allow me to say that in naming swords, you are selecting a weapon of which my principal is almost entirely ignorant?"

"I presume, if I had said either pistols or a rifle, or even your favorite Southern weapon, the double-barreled shot-gun, you would not have objected?"

"Well, the shot-gun is an arm which is never used by gentlemen in this section in an affair of this kind," the judge declared.

"The rifle and pistol are all right, though?"

"Oh, yes."

"And your principal doubtless prides himself upon his expertness with both?"

"He is a fair shot, I believe," the judge replied, with an air of unconcern, as though he really knew little of the matter.

"Not a dead shot—a man who never misses his mark?"

"Certainly not—that is, as far as my knowledge goes—but it is not his general repute."

"A fair shot, of course; possibly might be called a good one. Most of the gentlemen in this State have considerable knowledge in that direction. But as far as swords are concerned, he has no training in that line at all; probably has never had a sword in his hand a dozen times in his life, so really, although you have the right to choose swords, yet as I presume you are an expert in the use of that weapon, you are taking a fearful advantage of my principal."

"Oh, no, I am not; quite the contrary," Nimble Nick replied immediately.

"I am in exactly the same box as your man. I don't believe that I either have ever handled a sword a dozen times since I was born, so we are on a perfect equality as far as that is concerned."

"But with the rifle or pistol I am a dead shot—have made a profession of marksmanship, and at almost any distance within the range of the weapon, can hit the mark nine times out of ten; yes, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, so that it would be almost the same as an assassination for me to choose either rifle or pistol."

"I want to give your man some show for his life. I don't wish to murder him in cold blood."

Judge Richardson was staggered, both by the words of the young man and the positive way in which they were uttered.

He had met professional marksmen in his time, who traveled about giving exhibitions of their skill, and knew that the majority of such men were so experienced that for an ordinary shooter to meet them in battle array would be but mere madness.

If the young man was speaking truth—and the judge had become impressed with the belief that he was—to try to persuade him to use either pistols or rifles would be to deliberately plot the death of the major.

And although Judge Richardson had got Perkins into this scrape, it had not been with any idea of having the fire-eater killed.

"Oh, well, if that is the case, of course I shall not try to induce you to change your mind about the weapons; but I think there will be a difficulty in procuring a pair of swords in the town, for such things are not common with us."

"I've got a pair here; the real, genuine article, too!" the landlord hastened to declare, going behind the counter, and producing the weapons as he spoke.

"An' let an English actor chap have five dollars on them about a year ago, when the show was with bust up here."

"He said he got 'em in Germany, an' that they were what the German students used for to carve each other with, although they ain't seemed to be particularly sharp on either edge or point, but I presume a handy man could jo

one of them through a chap if he put strength enough into the job."

The judge remarked that he presumed that, under the circumstances, the swords would do, although they did not seem to him to be exactly the sort of tools which ought to be used, but as there wasn't anything better to be procured they would have to serve the purpose.

Then the location of the fight was discussed.

Captain Peters suggested that there was a nice level spot about a mile down the river, a retired place where some similar affairs had been successfully brought off.

The judge knew the ground and expressed his satisfaction at the choice.

The duel was arranged to take place at four that afternoon and then all the preliminaries being arranged Judge Richardson withdrew.

"This will beat a cock-fight all holler," Captain Peters remarked after the departure of the ambassador.

"I reckon I will have to take it in," he continued. "For old Major Perkins don't know any more about handling a sword than he does of running a locomotive, and I reckon that when you get arter him with one of these toad-stickers thar'll be a heap of fun."

"Oh, you kin bet yer bottom dollar that I will be thar!"

And almost everybody in the town of Janesville was of a similar opinion when the intelligence spread abroad that Nimble Nick, the famous circus-rider, and the redoubtable fire-eater, Major Adrastus Pebian Perkins, were going to fight a duel with small-swords, down in Crab Hollow, as the dueling ground was called, that afternoon.

The news traveled with wonderful rapidity, for the young men who had gone into the saloon to joke the major in regard to his defeat had told everybody they met that Perkins was going to challenge the stranger to mortal combat, and the landlord, thinking the knowledge too good to keep to himself confided to some of his cronies that the duel had been arranged.

When the major was made acquainted by the judge with the arrangements which had been made for the meeting he was extremely dissatisfied.

"I don't know anything about swords!" he declared, "and it is absurd to expect me to fight with a weapon of which I am totally ignorant."

The judge reasoned with the angry man and pointed out that under the circumstances it was not possible to have the matter settled differently.

"He knows no more about swords than you do and your game will be to attack him fiercely from the beginning."

"All you have to do is to jump at him and try to run him through with the steel."

"Yes, but that is a game that two can play at!" the major replied.

"He is much lighter on his feet than I am, and he may run the cursed sword into me before I get a chance to spit him."

"Well, of course, you will have to run the risk of that."

"For heaven's sake, judge, inquire around town and see if you can borrow any book on fencing so I can post myself a little about the deuced thing."

"Hang me if I believe I know how to even handle a sword."

"It strikes me that Bob Grierson has a book which tells about boxing, fencing, and all that sort of thing," the judge remarked, after cogitating over the matter for a moment.

"Borrow it for the love of heaven, and quick too, so that I can have a chance to pick up a few points."

The judge not only got the book, but induced the owner, Mr. Bob Grierson, one of the liveliest young men in the town, and who gravely asserted that he had once taken a course of lessons in a fencing-school at Cincinnati, to visit the major for the purpose of putting him through a course of sprouts, as Grierson termed it.

For a good two hours the young man labored with the old one, both of them armed with a couple of broomsticks to serve as swords, until the major was fairly worn out, and declared that it was his belief he would never be able to master any of the mysteries of "carte and tierce."

"The best thing you can do, major!" exclaimed young Grierson at the close of the lesson, desiring of imparting even the rudiments of the arming science to so dull a scholar, "is to use a sword just as you would a club. Rush at it and bang away at his head."

"Maybe he will be so confused by such an unexpected attack that you will be able to lay him. Hit him over the head first, and then if you

can manage to stagger him, give him the point and jab it into him, just as if it was a pitchfork, for all you are worth."

Upon reflection the major concluded that this game was as safe a one as he could play, and told Bob he would certainly follow his advice.

Promptly at the appointed time both of the duelists attended by their seconds and a doctor apiece were on the ground and to their amazement they found that nearly every eligible location in the neighborhood which commanded a view of the battle-ground was occupied by a spectator anxious to witness the contest.

It really seemed as if about all the male population of Janesville had turned out to see the fight.

Neither of the duelists was pleased at the prospect for they did not relish being made a show of, but as there was no help for it, after consultation they concluded to go ahead.

The contestants stripped for the fight, removed their coats and vests and girded in their waists tightly with their handkerchiefs.

The contrast between the two was great and to the minds of the spectators it did not seem as if the major stood much chance.

The dualists faced each other, the seconds retiring to a safe distance and the spectators watched the scene with eager interest.

The swords crossed, the shining blades glistening in the sunlight.

Nimble Nick had spoken the truth when he had said that he knew nothing about swords, but he had omitted to say that he was an expert hoop juggler and therefore possessed of a wonderful command over a stick, and on this occasion he used the sword as though it was a wand.

Hardly had the blades crossed when, with a peculiar motion, he whacked the major over the knuckles, causing him to drop his weapon as though it had suddenly become very hot.

Then he slapped the flat of the blade across the major's cheek, causing him to howl with pain. This done he stepped behind the bewildered man and caned him with the sword-blade!

The major howled with pain and anger, attempted to grasp his nimble foe, and failing, took to his heels and ran for dear life, while the amused spectators fairly rolled on the ground and roared with laughter.

Such a duel had never before been seen in Kentucky and the major kept away from Janesville for many a long day.

The scheme had failed to work.

CHAPTER XIV.

BUD APPEARS.

ON the evening of the same day that the ridiculous duel had taken place, as related in our last chapter, Colonel Dunwiddie and Judge Richardson sat in council in the Dunwiddie mansion.

As it had happened the colonel had not been down town that day, and so the first intelligence he had of the affair was carried to him by Judge Richardson.

The Kentucky colonel had a keen sense of humor, and he could not help being amused at the description of how the stranger had triumphed over the fire-eater.

"This Nimble Nick is a plucky rascal," he remarked, when Richardson came to the end of his recital.

"No doubt about that, but the ease with which he defeated Major Perkins is astonishing, for the major has generally been looked upon as being a tough nut."

"Well, in regard to that, I must say, judge, that I never had much opinion of him," the other remarked.

"I have always thought that he was considerable of a humbug."

"He's like many another man in this world who has managed to secure a reputation without much of anything to back it up."

"When he was a young man he was mixed up in two or three affrays, and as he managed to get the best of the fights, he has been posing as a hero ever since, but if you take the trouble to look back and examine his record, you will see that for a good ten or fifteen years he has not been concerned in any serious trouble."

"That is true enough, but he and his friends have done a heap of blowing, and so he has come to be regarded as a fire-eater, and a dangerous man."

"That is about the idea of it."

"Well, I must admit that I am disappointed," Richardson remarked, "for it was through me that the major was induced to attack the fellow."

"I had a suspicion that some one put him up to it."

"I am the man; the major had such a reputation as a fire-eater that I fancied he would make short work of this infernal showman, and so I took an opportunity to speak to him about the matter, saying what an outrage it was for a vile traveling vagabond to lift his eyes to a Kentucky lady of good family."

"And he took fire at once, of course, and volunteered to chastise the fellow," the colonel observed, quick to see how the scheme was worked.

"Yes, and as a result, has succeeded in making himself the laughing-stock of the town."

"The major is old," Dunwiddie remarked, "no match for this rascal of a showman."

"Now, my son Bud would be able to make the fellow crawfish, I am sure."

"By the way, when do you expect Bud?"

"He is liable to come at any time. He ought to have been here a week ago."

There is an old adage which says: "Speak of the fiend and he appears."

And in this case the mention of the name of the colonel's son just preceded his arrival, for hardly had the words left Dunwiddie's lips when one of the negro house-servants rushed in with the intelligence:

"Marse John done come, sah—yes, sah, for shure; he's jist gwine for to git off de hoss!"

A few moments more and the colonel's son made his appearance.

A tall, well-made fellow, tolerably good-looking, but with a rakish air about him which betrayed plainly that he was not yet through sowing his wild oats, as the career of reckless dissipation in which many young men indulge is good-naturedly called.

John Dunwiddie was his name, but in boyhood he had acquired the appellation of "Bud," and so it happened that though he had now grown to man's estate, he was more often called Bud Dunwiddie than by his own proper name.

The young man greeted his father heartily, shook hands with the judge, and then helped himself to a chair.

After a brief conversation in regard to how the heir of the Dunwiddies had enjoyed his trip, the colonel came at once to the subject which he had so much at heart, and explained to his son what had occurred during his absence.

But Bud, with that sublime confidence common to the average young man, who is quite sure he knows a great deal more than his elders, laughed at the idea.

"Oh, I think you must have made a mistake about the matter," he exclaimed.

"I know Egla like a book, and I am satisfied that she has too much pride to ever allow herself to be caught by any such vagabond."

Both the colonel and the judge shook their heads. They believed that, having watched the affair from the beginning, they knew more about it than the young man who assumed to decide the question in this off-hand way.

"You don't agree with me, eh?" said Bud, in that airy way which plainly signified that he was annoyed his judgment should be questioned.

"No, I do not think there is the least doubt that this circus-rider has made an impression upon Egla," the father replied.

"She believes that he saved her life, and I know she feels extremely grateful for the service."

"And gratitude is akin to love, as the poet says," the judge observed.

"Do you really think that Egla is likely to make a fool of herself," the young man remarked with the air of a sage.

"Yes, both the judge and myself think there is great danger of such a thing."

"Egla is a little inclined to be romantic, you know, Bud," the judge observed.

"And rather inclined to want to have her own way," the colonel added.

"She is a true Dunwiddie, and it is not an easy matter to drive one of our race."

"Well, I reckon that is true enough; we don't any of us take a back seat," Bud declared arrogantly.

"But if there is any danger of the girl becoming fascinated by this fellow, the best way to put a stopper on the affair is to get at the showman. Either give the rascal a trifle to get out, or else treat him to a sound thrashing."

The young man spoke in a careless, lofty way, just as if this latter operation he regarded as one which could be performed in the easiest possible manner.

The colonel and judge exchanged glances as much as to say, behold the vanity of youth!

"Bud, this task, I fear, is not so easy a one as you seem to imagine," Richardson remarked.

"This circus fellow is no common rascal who can be frightened away, and in regard to giving

him a thrashing, the job would not be eagerly sought by many of the Janesville boys after the taste the town has had of the man's quality."

And then the judge related how Nimble Nick had distinguished himself since his arrival in the Kentucky town.

But as far as the major was concerned the young man laughed at the idea of his being a fire-eater.

"A superannuated old fossil!" he declared.

"It is no particular credit to a man to get the best of any such relic of the past as Old Perkins."

Of course neither one of the others felt justified in declaring the major to be a good representative of the fighting men of Janesville.

"The first thing to be done, father," declared the young hopeful, "is to find out exactly how Eglantine stands in this matter, and as I believe in always taking the bull by the horns, I will hasten to her on 'the wings of love,' tell her that I have found it absolutely impossible to live away from the mansion honored by her presence and beg her to name the day when she will make me the proud possessor of her charms, and her extremely healthy bank account!" and as he finished the sentence a broad grin spread over his face.

Bud, with the vanity of youth, did not have a high opinion of the sense possessed by the average young lady of the day, and thought he would not have much trouble in securing the lady's consent.

The colonel shook his head and the judge followed his example.

It was their opinion that the girl would not be easily won.

"Is she in the house?" the young man asked.

"Yes," the father answered.

"I'll seek her at once, and get the thing off my mind," and Bud departed with an air of confidence which plainly revealed he had no fears in regard to the result.

"I wonder if we were such infernal conceited puppies when we were young!" exclaimed the judge, abruptly, after the door closed behind Bud.

The colonel coughed; the young man was his son, and as a father he hated to say anything against him, but in his heart he knew that the judge was not far wrong in his estimate.

In fifteen minutes the young man returned, looking decidedly crestfallen.

"The scheme is a total failure, dad," he exclaimed, the moment he made his appearance. "She will not have it at any price, and, I am sorry to say, treated me in the most contemptuous manner."

"I was nettled, of course, and expressed my opinion of her flirtation with his circus-rider in a pretty plain manner; whereupon she flew into a passion and told me to my teeth that she considered this mountebank to be more of a gentleman than I was, and in addition indulged in some very uncomplimentary remarks in regard to the way in which I have conducted myself during the past few years."

"In fact, so plainly did she talk that I had to come away or else lose my temper, and now in order to get satisfaction, I intend to cane this showman within an inch of his life!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE STREET-FIGHT.

YOUNG Dunwiddie had a deal of self-possession, and not even to his father would he reveal how he had been wounded by Eglantine's scorn.

He had all the chivalric notions common to the Kentucky gentleman in regard to woman-kind, and so, beyond uttering a few bitter words in comment of the girl's degrading herself by allowing her name to be connected with that of a vagabond showman, he did not bandy words with her.

He was terribly affronted all the same, and though he exerted himself to conceal the matter, yet he really was in a frightful passion, and as his education prevented him from venting his rage upon the girl, he determined to make the circus-rider suffer.

The judge had spent the night at the Dunwiddie mansion, and in the morning, when the three met at breakfast, they discussed the matter.

The young man explained his plan, which was simple in the extreme.

"I am going to wait upon this showman," Bud said, "and tell him that his attention to Miss Dunwiddie is distasteful to me."

"The chances are about a thousand to one, you know, that he will tell me to go to blazes."

"Then, being provided with this weapon, I will dust his jacket for him."

The young man exhibited a whalebone cane with a loaded head, and as he flourished it in the air, it was plain that a better tool for the purpose could not be found.

"Suppose he shows fight?" the judge asked.

"Well, I am armed," and the young man drew his revolver from his pistol-pocket. "And if the rascal does not submit to take his caning, I will bore a couple of holes through him."

The colonel nodded complacently.

In his judgment Bud was fully equal to the task, but upon Richardson's face appeared a shade of doubt.

From what he had seen of the prowess of the stranger he fancied that young Dunwiddie would not be able to "make the rifle" as easily as he anticipated.

It was about ten o'clock when the three reached the town.

They proceeded straight to the hotel where the showman had his headquarters, and when they came within a block of it the elder Dunwiddie caught sight of Nimble Nick standing in front of the building, and immediately pointed him out to his son.

"Dashy-looking chap, aint he?" Bud observed.

"But he will not look so dandified ten minutes hence when I get through with him."

And then, grasping his cane with firm determination, he advanced to where our hero stood, crossing the street as he approached the hotel, leaving his companions upon the other side.

Nimble Nick had been in conversation with the landlord of the hotel, and he, noticing the approach of the three, called Nimble Nick's attention to them, explaining who the young man was.

"That Bud is a hard case," the landlord said in conclusion, "and from the way he is flourishing his cane I shouldn't be surprised if he had come on purpose to pick a fuss with you."

"In that case hadn't you better retire so as not to get mixed up in the affair?" Nimble Nick suggested.

"But that's three of 'em," remarked the host, who had taken a great fancy to his guest, and with true Kentucky hospitality, was disposed to take a part in the quarrel.

Just at this moment the young man quitted his companions and crossed the street.

"He is going it alone," Nick said as he noticed the movement.

"I reckon he can't bluff you on any lone hand, eh?" observed the other.

"Not much!"

"If you come to a fight, and he goes to pull a weapon on you, look out for him, for he is reckoned to be an awful quick fellow on the draw. Takes arter his father, the colonel, you know, who was allers mighty smart at getting the drop on his man when it came to pistol practice."

"I will keep my eyes open."

"You are heeled, I s'pose?"

"Oh, yes; a man traveling around the way I do has to be."

"Salivate him, darn his carcass!" exclaimed the landlord, as he retreated into the hotel. "Salivate him and take some of the blamest conceit outen him!"

In the hotel the landlord took a position by the window so he could command a view of the encounter.

In his mind there was no doubt that there was fun ahead.

Nick had taken a good look at the young man when the landlord called his attention to him, and although Bud Dunwiddie was a tolerably well-built fellow, yet he was in no respect a match for such a medium-sized Hercules as the circus-rider.

Bud came straight up to Nimble Nick, halted and surveyed him from head to foot in an extremely insolent manner.

"I reckon, Mister Man, that you are the chap I want to see."

"Well, I don't know anything in regard to that, for you have the advantage of me at present."

"Yes, I reckon I have, and I reckon I intend to keep it, too!"

"The future will decide that."

"You are one of these blamed showmen, I believe?"

"Yes, you are right there."

"I hate showmen."

"Maybe there isn't any love lost."

"My name is Bud Dunwiddie; do you understand who you are talking to now?"

"Oh, yes, I will take your word for it. I don't believe you would lie unless you could

make something by it, and in this case I don't see how you could gain anything."

The young Kentuckian was rendered furious by this answer, for it suddenly dawned upon him that he was getting the worst of this word encounter.

"Yes, my name is Bud Dunwiddie, and I am the cousin of a certain party, and I want you to understand that there must be an end to certain foolishness. Do you understand?"

"I am rather dull sometimes, I fear, and I shall have to ask you to explain yourself more fully."

"Well, you have scraped an acquaintance with Miss Eglantine Dunwiddie, and I have waited upon you for the purpose of saying that the thing has got to be stopped."

"Does she request it?"

"I require it!" young Dunwiddie answered, hotly.

"Suppose I refuse to comply?"

"You had better not, if you know when you are well off."

"You have been too long in this town, anyway, and the quicker you get out the better it will be for your health."

"Oh, I don't believe you are a good judge in regard to that."

"Don't you give me any back talk, or I'll dust your jacket for you now!" and Bud flourished the cane menacingly in the air.

"No, you will not!" and Nimble Nick confronted the young Kentuckian menacingly.

"You are not man enough to do it!" A retort that caused Bud Dunwiddie to make a blow at Nimble Nick's head, intending to cut him across the face, but the young acrobat was prepared for the attack; he evaded the stroke, deftly caught the descending wrist, and almost before the surprised Kentuckian knew what had happened, had wrested the cane from him; then, with a violent push, Bud was forced back, and Nimble Nick proceeded to thrash him in the most scientific manner.

Rendered almost frantic at this unexpected turn of affairs young Dunwiddie endeavored to close with his opponent, but the other easily evaded the attempt, and keeping at arm's length punished the young Kentuckian so severely that he retreated in a rather undignified fashion.

By this time the affray had attracted general attention and the street was filled with spectators.

When he got beyond Nimble Nick's reach Bud Dunwiddie pulled out his pistol; but Nick was equally quick to produce his weapon.

The two fired almost simultaneously.

The punishment the Kentuckian received rendered his nerves unsteady and his bullet went wide of the mark; while the Circus Prince's shot was more effective.

It struck the hammer of Bud's revolver, shattering it, and then glanced upward into Dunwiddie's shoulder.

Bud reeled and fell, and the colonel, unable to restrain himself, plucked out his revolver and ran across the street.

A warning cry from the landlord put Nick on his guard. Wheeling quickly he faced the irate colonel.

Dunwiddie fired.

The ball cut through the sleeve of Nimble Nick's coat.

As quick as a flash the young acrobat fired, and down went the colonel, with a bullet in the side.

The fight was over.

Nimble Nick retired into the hotel while sympathizing friends carried off the wounded men.

And Janesville in wonder declared that the circus-rider was as good a man as ever struck the town.

CHAPTER XVI.

A LAST CHANCE.

THE night was dark, although the moon was out, but the face of the heavens was covered by heavy banks of dark clouds as though a storm was approaching, and when the clouds passed over the moon the silver rays of the fair queen of night fell not on the earth, and an inky darkness reigned.

Acting on the advice of the landlord of the hotel, Nimble Nick had "taken to the woods," for after the stirring part which he had played, as related in our last chapter, the host, who had taken a great fancy to the young man, warned him that the friends of the Dunwiddies would be apt to make it particularly hot for him.

"I don't reckon that they will be hungry to

try any more fighting business," the old man observed, shrewdly, "for you gi'n 'em such a dose in this last skirmish as will be apt to make 'em fight shy of you in that line."

"Their dodge now will be to git the law arter you and jail you if they can, and there isn't much doubt about their being able to do that, you know, for of course you did go in and salivate 'em hot and heavy."

"Arter you are jailed you kin give bonds and git out, of course, for I reckon that nobody is going to kick the bucket, although I heard that Bud Dunwiddie was pretty badly hurt."

"Yes, I see," Nimble Nick observed.

"Even if one or two on 'em was to die, they couldn't do nothing to you, for you fit in self-defense."

"You would have to stand a trial, though, and if you couldn't give bonds, you would have to lay in jail until the trial was ended; so my advice to you is to take to the woods for a few days until I see how the cat jumps; then, if there is any danger of your being jailed, I will hunt up some bondsmen who will pull you out."

Nick thanked the host for his kindness, and arranging a means of communication so that he could keep posted in regard to what events transpired in the town, "lit out," to use the Kentucky phrase.

Five miles back in the woods was a deserted log house in a solitary spot, and to this place of refuge the landlord directed the young man.

He provided him with a double-barreled shotgun, ammunition and a supply of provisions, together with a bag of feed for the mare, and thus equipped, Nimble Nick shook the dust of Janesville from his feet, departing under cover of the night.

It was a sharp move and executed just in time, for Nimble Nick had not been gone an hour, when an officer, accompanied by a strong posse to assist him in capturing the circus-rider if he was disposed to resist the mandates of the law, paid a visit to the hotel.

"Too late, boys," the landlord observed, with a wise shake of the head, when the officer made known the object of his visit.

"Too late to put salt on the tail of this hyer bird, and I reckon you will have the hull State of Ohio to hunt him in."

By this skillfully worded speech the pursuers were given to understand that their game had crossed the river, and although there wasn't one of the party but what knew that if the fugitive had got across the river there wasn't the least chance for them to capture him, yet they went down to the bank and interviewed the ferryman who had charge of the diminutive steam craft which served as the means of communication between the Ohio and Kentucky shores.

But the ferryman was a gruff fellow who had happened to witness the street-fight, and being one of the "poor whites" himself, he had a sympathy for the stranger who had whipped the Kentucky bloods so handsomely.

So not a bit of satisfaction did they get out of him in regard to the matter; but from his manner they came to the conclusion that the showman had succeeded in crossing the river, and was now safe from pursuit on the Ohio shore, so the search was given up.

Nick was as safe from discovery in the lonely spot which the landlord had selected for his hiding-place as though he was a hundred miles away.

But when the shades of night covered the earth he felt a strange desire to visit the Dunwiddie mansion, and, if possible, gain speech with the young girl.

He was anxious to see what impression she had formed of the bloody street fight in which he had played so prominent a part.

Nimble Nick's forest retreat was only a short distance from the Mount Sterling pike, upon which the Dunwiddie mansion was situated, and thinking that he might take it into his head to visit it, he had taken pains to learn from the landlord all the particulars in regard to it.

As that worthy had explained, it was an extremely large, old-fashioned mansion, a fine type of the old Kentucky home, and as there wasn't another house on the road that was at all like it, it was not likely that he could miss it, even in the darkness.

The plantation was one of the largest in that section of the country, and covered nearly two thousand acres, all cleared land, with the exception of about fifty acres in woodland, reserved for supplying the house with fuel.

It was about nine o'clock when Nimble Nick approached the house, and the lights blazing from the mansion and the negro huts adjoining showed that none of the dwellers on the plantation had yet retired to rest.

Nimble Nick had approached the house on the back of his bonny brown mare, but when fairly within sight of the dwelling he dismounted, taking advantage of the shelter afforded by a little clump of timber.

In the middle of the little grove he placed the mare, not fastening her at all, but bidding her remain until he should return or summon her.

The animal had been so well trained that she would obey a command almost as well as a human, and she was so intelligent that she seemed to understand almost every word that was said to her.

After disposing of the horse Nimble Nick approached the house, moving as cautiously as a red Indian on the war trail.

He was afraid of encountering either some of the dogs, of which there seemed to be quite a number about the place, judging from the barks which rose on the air every now and then, or the servants, who might be enjoying the fresh breezes of the night in the open air.

What he had feared, occurred.

When he was within a hundred yards of the house, he ran into a woman who stepped suddenly from behind a tree right in his way.

"Oh, Lord of massy, who's dat?" the female exclaimed, in a voice which plainly betrayed that the hot blood of Africa flowed in her veins.

"Don't be alarmed! I am a friend," Nimble Nick hastened to declare, for fear the woman would take fright when she discovered she had encountered a stranger and give the alarm.

Just then the moon which had been partially hid by a great ragged cloud, came sailing out from behind the veil in her full splendor and the two had a good view of each other.

The negress was a comely young yellow girl, richly dressed, evidently one of the upper servants, for over her head was thrown a costly lace veil slightly the worse for wear, but such as no servant would think of buying.

A piece of her mistress's discarded finery evidently.

Nimble Nick was a shrewd observer, and the moment he got a good view of the girl, his heart gave a great bound, for he fancied that luck had brought in his way the waiting-maid of Eglantine.

And as for the girl, she gave a little cry of surprise when she saw Nimble Nick's face.

"Bress de lam', if it ain't de gemmen himself!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, you know me?"

"Yes, sah, 'deed I do!"

"Well, that's lucky."

"You's de circus gemmen dat rides de brown horse."

"Yes, I'm the man."

"My misses will be dreadful glad for to see you."

"Your mistress?"

"Yes, sah."

"And who is your mistress?"

Our hero put the question with a beating heart for he suspected what the answer would be.

"'Deed and youse know her right well; it is de lady w'at owns dis yere plantation."

"Miss Dunwiddie?"

"Yes, sah; dat's de bery one, and she's kinder been suspecting dat you mought be sneaking round dis yer place to-night, and she tole me for to go out and keep my eyes open dredful wide."

"Will it be possible for me to see Miss Dunwiddie?"

"'Deed an' it will, sure as yer born! Dat is w'at she wanted me fur to sneak out and see if I couldn't light on you somewhere."

"You jest stay hyer, and don't you be afeard of any of the common black trash coming on dis yere little timber."

"One ob de overseers done went and hanged himself to one of de trees hyer, and de fool niggers dey tink dat dere's a ghost in hyer dat will pinch 'em mighty tight if he gets hold of 'em."

"Jest you wait hyer, and young missy will come!"

With this assurance the girl hurried away, leaving Nimble Nick to congratulate himself upon the good luck which had attended him.

That Eglantine had expected his coming, he took to be a happy omen.

Despite the girl's assurance, though, he did not feel so certain that there wasn't any danger of any one discovering him lurking so near the mansion.

The fear of the spirit which was supposed to haunt the place might keep the blacks away, but he was not so much in fear of the darkness as of the white men, of whom there were quite a number on the place.

So, in order to be prepared for all contingencies, he carefully examined his weapons, for he

had already seen enough of Kentucky to understand that, in some respects, the State was like Texas.

A man might go ten years without having occasion to need a weapon, but when he did need one, he needed it bad.

But no danger came, though, and within ten minutes the beautiful Miss Dunwiddie stood by his side.

CHAPTER XVII.

DESPERATE MEASURES.

SHE gave Nimble Nick her hand in the most cordial manner.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come!" she exclaimed. "And it is so strange, too; I had a presentiment that you would, and that is why I sent my maid out with instructions to look for you."

"Patty is a good, faithful girl and I knew I could trust her."

"I suppose you have heard an account of the affray which took place in the streets of Janesville this evening?"

"Oh, yes, first I was treated to my uncle's version of the affair," and as she spoke her lip curled in contempt.

"You, single-handed, met the colonel and his precious hopeful Bud on the street and attempted to assassinate them, although it is not usually the rule for one man to attempt to assassinate two."

"You failed in your purpose and then ran away like a coward."

"I retreated after I had laid my enemies out. I will admit, but it was because both of them were on the ground apparently dead or dying, and I couldn't very well keep up a battle with men who were incapable of offering resistance."

"I know all that!" the girl exclaimed. "John our old negro coachman was in the town and saw the conflict from the beginning, and from him I received the true account."

"But how is the colonel and his son? Are their wounds likely to prove serious?"

"Oh, no, neither one has suffered materially. Their wounds are painful, but not at all dangerous. In fact they are not serious enough to cause either one of them to take to their couch."

"I had quite a stormy scene with my uncle to-night. He is my guardian, or was, for I am now of age, and has had the entire control of my property ever since the death of my father and mother."

"So I understand."

"Now, although I am only a girl, yet I know something of business, for I received an excellent education, and although I have never troubled my uncle to call him to an account, I know just as well as can be that he has not handled my property to the best advantage."

"For nearly ten years now, ever since I have been old enough to know anything about it, the colonel, instead of attending to his business has been engaged in speculating, and I am certain from some guarded remarks which I have heard him make at odd times, that he has been losing steadily."

"If you haven't heard him boast of his success the chances are great that he has met with reverses."

"I have never heard him speak of gaining in my life. I feel almost sure that not only has he lost all his own fortune but he has used a large sum belonging to me."

"Guardians will do such things sometimes."

"And now he is trying to raise a match between this miserable Bud Dunwiddie, whom I have always hated since I was a child, and myself; his idea being that when I am his son's wife I will make trouble even if he has lost a goodly sum of my money."

And the girl's glorious eyes flashed and her bosom heaved with excitement as she made the announcement.

"If he has used your money, lost it, and now finds that he cannot replace it, it is only natural for him to devise some such means to cover the matter."

"We had words on the subject to-night, for he was smarting under his defeat and for the first time partially removed the mask which he has always worn in my presence."

"He showed himself to be a man capable of playing the brutal tyrant to perfection, and when I, irritated by both his words and manner told him that I did not think I would ever bring myself to look with favor upon a union with his son, he set up the ridiculous claim that I was not yet of age and therefore would be obliged to do exactly as he said."

"I came of age six months ago, but he declares there is a mistake about the matter and that I am a year younger than I think myself."

"A desperate device," Nimble Nick remarked, thoughtfully.

"The man is desperate. I never saw him in such a state before, and I do not think I wrong him when I say I believe he would not hesitate to use force to accomplish his purpose.

"But I am not going to remain here. I am going to run away, and this very night, too, for he may take such measures to-morrow that I can't get away if I want to."

Our hero felt that he had received a cue to speak, and if he hesitated now he did not deserve to win such a glorious creature.

Briefly, then, he urged his suit; and the girl, with downcast eyes, admitted that he had won her heart.

"You saved my life," she declared, "and it is yours whenever you choose to ask for it."

"Let us fly to-night, then," Nimble Nick urged. "Naught can be gained by delay and much may be lost."

"I will go with you anywhere!" she declared.

"Mount Sterling or Paris—either place will do. We can find a minister in either town who will unite us," Nimble Nick observed.

"The Paris road is by far the best of the two," Eglantine observed, acquainted with all the roads in the neighborhood for a good fifty miles.

"Yes, and Paris will be the best point for us to strike, for from Paris we can go to either Cincinnati or Louisville as may seem most desirable.

"Not that I dread any danger after we are once married, for when we are joined in the bonds of matrimony I will defy the world to part us!" the young man declared.

"When shall we set out?" she asked.

"That depends upon what preparations you need to make for the journey."

"Nothing to speak of; I will don my riding-habit, and strap a small portmanteau, which will carry the few articles I need, to my saddle. Luckily I have a couple of hundred dollars in my purse, and when we arrive in Paris I can easily procure anything I may want.

"I think the quicker we get off the better, for if we delay there may be obstacles thrown in our path."

"Yes, to-night the road is clear, and we ought to take advantage of it," Nimble Nick remarked.

"Had we better set out immediately?"

"Yes, if you can get your horse from the stable without exciting any alarm."

"Oh, there will be no difficulty about that," she replied, confidently. "I can take the horse out by the back way, and no one will be the wiser. At such an hour as this all the servants are in the house, for all the stable work is done, and there isn't anything to keep them there. Have you a horse?"

"Yes, about a thousand yards up the road, in a little grove."

"I know the spot," the girl assured. "You had better wait for me there, for this is so close to the house, that if I ventured to bring the horse here I might be observed. In from twenty minutes to half an hour you may expect me."

And then with due caution she proceeded to make her way back to the mansion.

Nimble Nick retreated in an equally careful manner.

He succeeded in reaching the grove where he had left the mare without meeting any one.

The horse was exactly where he had left her.

Time seemed to pass on leaden wings to Nimble Nick, as he waited for the girl to come.

At last though, he heard the hoof-strokes of a steed advancing slowly.

Grasping his own horse by the bridle, he peered forth.

As he had expected, it was the girl.

She was not mounted, but was leading the horse.

The girl had a wise head on her young shoulders.

"Did you succeed in getting the horse out without attracting attention?" Nimble Nick asked, as he assisted the girl to mount.

"Oh, yes, although I was very much afraid lest I should be discovered," she replied.

"A half-a-dozen of Bud's boon companions have come, evidently intent upon having a good time, and they sent up-stairs for me, but I returned word that they must excuse me, for I did not feel like coming down, and was getting ready to retire for the night."

By this time Nimble Nick was in the saddle.

"I was not really telling an untruth, you

know," she continued, "for I was getting ready to retire from the house for the night."

"Oh, the statement was allowable under the circumstances, of course."

They had set out, but were allowing their horses to walk, intending not to force them into a gallop until they had reached a safe distance from the mansion, so that the sound of the hoof-strokes might not arouse the curiosity of any one who might happen to be on the grounds of the mansion, and thus lead to a discovery.

"There is a cross-road a half-a-mile up which will lead us over to the Paris pike," the girl remarked when they came to a point where they thought it safe to urge their steeds into a lope."

"We shall get such a start that even if your absence is discovered, and the pursuers should hit upon the very road we have taken, the chances are great that they will not be able to overtake us."

"Of course only by an accident, approaching the miraculous, could such a discovery be made."

This seemed certainly true, and Eglantine observed as much.

It was a beautiful night, and the two proceeded onward enjoying the ride as much as though they were merely out for a pleasure excursion, instead of being on a quest which, if discovered by any untoward chance, would bring upon their track angry, vengeful foes thirsting for blood.

When the cross-road was reached they turned into it and rode directly for the Paris pike.

It is the unexpected that always happens, and on this road the pair rode past a negro who took to the shadows of the "bush" when he heard the sound of horses' hoofs approaching.

This black was Colonel Dunwiddie's own man, a treacherous, sneaky scoundrel who had been on a thieving expedition to a neighboring plantation, and was afraid of being seen abroad by any one.

His eyes dilated as the fugitives rode by him in blissful ignorance that they were observed.

"By golly! it's dat circus cuss and Misses Eglantine!" he cried.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY.

AFTER reaching the Paris pike the fugitives pushed forward at a brisk pace; both of their horses were excellent ones and could easily cover from eight to ten miles an hour and keep it up.

Eglantine was mounted upon her private steed, the renowned Big Sandy, to whom Nimble Nick felt duly grateful, for it was to the horse that he owed thanks for affording him the opportunity to make the lady's acquaintance.

Big Sandy's runaway escapade had seemed to have done him a world of good, for he had not displayed any temper since.

Nimble Nick noticed this and remarked that the horse seemed to be much improved, and to this Eglantine assented.

For about one hour the two rode on, happy in each other's company and then the lady's horse began to show symptoms of lameness.

Nimble Nick was the first to notice it.

"I don't like the way your horse is stepping," he said. "It seems to me as if he was going lame."

"Well, I noticed a moment ago that there appeared to be something the matter with him, but I didn't speak of it for I thought I must be mistaken."

They slackened their pace a little so that they might be better able to scrutinize the steed.

Nimble Nick was a thorough horseman, and it did not take him long to discover that Big Sandy was in trouble and appeared to be getting lamer and lamer as he went on.

He shook his head and a troubled look appeared upon his face.

The girl was watching him anxiously, and noticed the expression immediately.

"Poor fellow! he is getting dreadfully lame, isn't he?"

"Yes, there isn't the least doubt of that. The lameness is located in that right forefoot, and he has almost lost the use of the leg."

"Notice how he flinches whenever it touches the ground."

Eglantine watched the movements of the horse for a few minutes and saw that the statement was correct.

"I do not understand it at all," she remarked.

"He seemed to be all right when we started."

"He may have picked up a nail somewhere on the road," replied Nimble Nick, using the old jockey expression.

"I had better dismount and examine him;

something must be done for inside of five minutes he will lose the use of that leg entirely unless I am able to do something to relieve him."

"Poor beast! what a shame it is!" the girl exclaimed as she leaped lightly from the saddle, without waiting for her companion to assist her.

Nimble Nick gained the ground at the same moment.

By this time the clouds, which had covered the face of the moon at intervals ever since the darkness had set in, had all dispersed, the threatened storm having blown over, and the silver queen of night shone out in full splendor rendering the face of nature almost as distinct as by day.

So Nick was enabled to examine the horse without any difficulty. Excellent horseman though he was in this case he was puzzled. He did not know what to make of this sudden attack of lameness.

It did not seem to him the beast could be so afflicted from so slight a cause as picking up some foreign matter in the road until it was discovered to be some long sharp substance, which had penetrated into the tender part of the hoof.

One thing, though, was certain—the horse was disabled and so badly that the chances were great that he would not be able to cover another mile that night either with or without a rider on his back.

"Isn't it a dreadful pity!" Eglantine declared.

"The poor beast is dead lame."

The girl, having been used to steeds all her life, like the most of her sex in her station in life in Kentucky, was no mean judge of horseflesh and was able to see that the brute was in great pain.

There was really something human in the look of the animal's eyes and the way in which he put his muzzle down on her shoulder as though he courted sympathy.

Nimble Nick with a gentle, caressing sort of motion lifted up the leg in the hoof of which the lameness had developed and proceeded to examine it.

Just a single glance he gave, and then a low whistle of astonishment escaped from his lips.

The girl, understanding that some discovery had been made, bent her head eagerly to look.

"The horse has been tampered with," Nimble Nick explained, and then drew the girl's attention to a nail imbedded in the hoof, with the point upward, almost until the head was forced into the horn.

The circus-rider had a combination knife, containing a small collection of useful tools in addition to the regular blades, which he always carried in his pocket, finding it a handy article in his business.

Taking a pair of pincers from the knife, he essayed to draw out the nail.

"What does it mean?" inquired the girl.

"Do you think that the horse did not get the nail in his hoof by accident?"

"It is almost certain he did not. Not once in a thousand times could a horse tread upon a nail in such a way as to drive it up into the quick as this has been driven."

"Oh, no; I feel sure that the horse has been doctored, as the jockies say."

"That is, the nail was filed to a point and driven into the hoof in such a way that at first it would not produce lameness, but as the horse gallops along the nail goes further and further in, and at last, when a certain point is reached, the horse breaks down, hopelessly lame, just as this poor beast has done."

"See!"

And with the word Nimble Nick drew out the nail and held it up for the girl's inspection.

The nail, as in his description, had been filed to a point.

"What a cruel, cowardly act!" Eglantine exclaimed, indignantly.

"Yes, there's no mistake about that! The trick has worked well, too—the horse is so lame as to be unable to go on. We shall have to leave him here, and you must take a mount on my mare."

"Is she strong enough to carry both of us?"

"Oh, yes; she is able, of course, but I calculated to walk."

"No, no!" cried Eglantine, immediately.

"If it is not too great a burden for the noble beast, both of us can ride."

"But who do you suppose could have driven the nail in my horse's hoof?"

"There is only one person in the world who would be apt to do such a thing, and that is your guardian."

"You see he has a longer head, and is shrewder than you give him credit for being."

"He foresaw this movement on your part,

and planted the nail in your horse's hoof, so that the animal would go lame on the journey.

"And now, my dear Eglantine, as the best way to meet trouble is to look it squarely in the face, let me tell you that the chances are great that your absence has been discovered long ere this, for this nail business is proof positive to me, that Colonel Dunwiddie has expected some such move as this, and has been on the lookout to frustrate it."

"We must mount then, and ride as if for our lives!" the girl exclaimed, her eyes flashing and her breast heaving with excitement.

"Hush—listen!" exclaimed Nimble Nick, bending his head in the direction of the way in which they had come.

"I thought I heard the clatter of distant hoofs."

"Yes, you are right!" exclaimed the girl, after listening attentively for a moment.

"We are pursued!"

"Not a doubt of it, and by quite a party too—six or eight of them I reckon, from the sounds."

"We must mount, and away at once!" Eglantine cried.

"Stay a moment! Is that the best course for us to pursue?"

"Our horse will be burdened with a double load, and if our pursuers are well mounted, and undoubtedly they are, for this is the region of good horses, the chances are that my mare, fleet as she is, will not be able to distance them."

"I think our game is to find a hiding-place near here somewhere, and conceal ourselves until they ride past, then we can double back and take the Mount Stirling road, and so throw them off the track."

"It will be impossible, you know, in a well-traveled road like this, for them to trail us by our tracks."

"It would puzzle the keenest prairie man in the daylight, and at night no living scout sent could hit off the trail."

"Yes, yes, that is by far the wisest course."

But even as Nimble Nick advanced to take the bridle of his horse there came a sound to his ears which told him that it would be impossible for the plan to be carried out.

"Do you hear that?" he exclaimed.

"That upsets that scheme; our only hope is to trust to my mare's speed."

The girl listened for a moment.

"It is the baying of a hound!"

"Yes, they are following us with dogs. Good-by to all hope of evading pursuit by seeking concealment. The speed of our horse is the only thing that can save us."

Lightly as a bird he vaulted into the saddle, and then bending over he took Eglantine in his strong arms and placed her on the horse before him, put spurs to his horse and away they went. The noble mare bounded bravely on, carrying her heavy burden with great courage.

For fully an hour she held her own against her pursuers as far as Nimble Nick could judge from the sounds that came from his rear, but after that time the animal began to tire, and the expert rider could plainly see that she was laboring under difficulties.

At first he applied the spur, thinking that she merely required an incentive, but though she responded gamely, yet he soon recognized that it was her strength and not her will that faltered.

The pace slackened.

The noise made by the pursuers in the rear began to grow more and more distinct; sure proof that they were gaining.

"Our bolt is almost shot!" Nimble Nick said to the girl, believing that it was not wise to keep the truth from her.

"Oh, yes, they are gaining rapidly upon us now; we are near the crossing of the Licking River, and the road improves beyond the stream. We will surely be overtaken. What will you do?"

"Fight them to the death if you are willing I should!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FIGHT BY THE LICKING.

EGLA lifted her ripe red lips and received the first kiss of her lover.

"Fight them!" she exclaimed.

"I would far rather be killed than separated from you; but are you well armed?"

"Yes, I have a pair of seven-shooters and a pocketful of spare cartridges," he replied.

"Anticipating that in the future there might be trouble, I prepared to meet it."

"I also am armed; in my bosom I have a six-shooter, fully loaded, so that will give you six more shots."

"After we cross the Licking I will select some suitable spot and dismount, conceal the mare in the woods, so that there will not be any danger of having her hit by stray bullets."

"Then select a position where they can't surround me, and if they want war they shall have it!"

Nimble Nick carried out this plan to the letter after crossing the stream.

A short distance beyond there was a spot where the rocks cropped out of the earth, forming a sort of a natural fortification.

Nimble Nick and the girl dismounted, concealed the bonny brown mare in the neighboring thicket, and then ensconcing themselves amid the rocky formation, awaited the approach of the pursuers, who, from the noise they made, were evidently close at hand.

The deep-toned notes of the dogs could be distinctly heard, and as the scent was getting "hot," they gave tongue constantly.

Nick took out a handful of cartridges and gave them to the girl.

"I will only use one revolver at a time, if I can help it, and when a weapon is empty you can recharge it," he said.

Eglantine was glad to be able to be of assistance.

Her blood was up, and she was as determined not to yield to their pursuers as the young man.

There was a gentle rise from the river to the position where Nimble Nick had determined to stand at bay, and the way was clear, there being no timber in a situation to screen the assailants from the fire of the intrenched man.

Out of the gloom came the pursuers, seven of them, and in the advance rode Colonel Dunwiddie and his hopeful son, Bud, but first of all came the rascally negro who had been the means of bringing the pursuers upon the track of the fugitive.

The negro was in charge of the dogs, two ferocious bloodhounds, and the moment they crossed the river their instincts revealing to them that the fugitives were close at hand, they broke loose from the negro and came rushing up the hill open-mouthed.

"Let me kill one of the beasts!" exclaimed Eglantine, all the fiery blood of her old race swelling in her veins.

The dogs rushed at the rocky barrier as though they meant to tear the fugitives limb from limb.

But as they reared up against the rock, preparing to spring over, a couple of pistol-shots rung out on the air, and the brutes tumbled over headlong, howling dismally, writhing in the agonies of death.

A yell of disgust escaped from the riders when they beheld the doom of the dogs.

They reined in their steeds, dismounted, and drew their revolvers.

"Come on, gentlemen!" cried colonel Dunwiddie, brandishing his pistol.

Nimble Nick rose from behind his rocky breastwork.

"Gentlemen, I warn you that I am armed and prepared to sell my life dearly. If you dare to attack me your blood be on your own heads."

The assailants' answer to this warning was a volley of revolver shots.

Nick Monday seemed to bear a charmed life, for not a bullet came within a yard of him.

He waited a moment until he judged his game was within easy range; then he opened fire.

Every shot seemed to tell.

Six shots and three men down—colonel Dunwiddie and the negro dead. Bud Dunwiddie badly wounded, and three of the others scratched by the bullets.

The fight was ended.

The young men, Bud's companions, who had volunteered to "hunt the showman," had got all the hunting they wanted, and rushing to their horses mounted in hot haste and rode away at their topmost speed, leaving Nimble Nick and his lady-love to proceed in peace on their journey.

In due time they reached Paris and there were married.

Then in the bold way he had of facing difficulties Nimble Nick and his wife returned to Janesville to "face the music."

He had to stand trial, of course, but as it was clearly proved that he acted in self-defense, he was discharged without a stain upon his character.

The colonel's death led to the overhauling of his accounts, and though his speculations were great yet Eglantine's fortune was not seriously impaired.

Our story is told; safe in the harbor of happiness we leave our hero, the Circus Prince, Nimble Nick.

THE END.

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